

Just One Mistake (is all it will take)

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Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Scars From Tomorrow
Collections:	We Love Angst In This Household , fics to knock your socks off , SBI Fics for the soul , sipping cocoa and listening to mitski , incomplete v good fics , Found family sbi has my <3 , Feral's favorites , so what im a tommyinnit kin , Rat loves angst , Blobfish's favorite fics , DizzyRose

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by [Bluestrasa](#)

Summary

Whisper blinked, dumbfounded. “Nix what—”

“Tommy! Tommy, can you hear me?” She scooped up the body and Whisper finally got a decent look at him.

He was young, too young to be passed out alone in a rainy alley. His blonde hair was darkened by water and streaks that must have been blood if his batter face was anything to go by. His skin was pale and his body trembled slightly, even in unconsciousness.

Whisper moved side by side with his partner, pulling out first aid supplies and searching for major injuries. “You know this kid?” he asked.

--- or ---

What do you get when one of the city's most famous vigilantes is actually a sixteen-year-old with the opposite of flashy powers and severe trust issues? A tragedy in the making, that's what.

Notes

Hi! This is the first work I've published and I'm really enjoying it!

This was inspired by a bunch of both vigilante and foster family AU's to the point where I can't really give any specific people credit. Let me know what you think!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Act I

In all honesty, Tommy's night had already been pretty shit before he got stabbed.

It started with the rain. For days the air had been thick with humidity and the sky had been an unwelcoming shade of grey, warning of bad weather with no end in sight. But the second Tommy finally finished enough school work to sneak out for a good ol' night of vigilante patrolling, the sky opened up and let all hell break loose.

Following the rain was a series of small annoyances that, in his mind, just added to the *'Very Bad night'*. Like the fact that he had nearly fallen down the fire escape as he snuck out, one of the ladder rungs simply giving out under his foot. Tommy's curses and the sound of clattering of metal and were covered by a loud crash of thunder. Then almost an hour later he nearly took a swan dive off of a four-story building. Somehow the laces of his combat boot had come undone, causing him to trip dangerously close to the edge of the roof.

Normally there was an upside to the rain: less crime. However, for some reason tonight it was not enough to deter even the lamest of pickpockets and muggers. Not even the heroes were slowed by the downpour as Tommy spotted them across the rooftops, travelling in pairs to scare off any criminals that were faint of heart.

So he spent the first half of the night stopping petty crimes and helping lost citizens get home safe as the thunderstorm began to pick up. It wasn't out of the ordinary for one of his patrol nights. Tommy had only managed to get away with his illegal crime-stopping ways because he stuck to the small stuff. If he tried to get involved with the big game villains there was an equal chance of dying or getting caught by a hero. Besides, a fourteen-year-old would've been killed going after anything bigger than a pickpocket or a lost cat.

However, Tommy wasn't fourteen anymore. He had been a vigilante for just over two years, which, despite his best efforts, came with some bigger missions and fights. His slow, soggy night was interrupted by a call from Tubbo on his network communicator.

"Theseus, this is Haywire, do you copy?"

"This is Theseus, I read you Haywire," he answered, hand raised to the communicator in his ear.

"EndWalker needs backup near the old textiles factory. Amnesia is also on her way but you're the closest," Tubbo informed him. *"Get moving while I find an exact location for you."*

Tommy was already on the move, using his grappling gun to swing down to the network of alleyways that connected the city. The fastest way to the textile factory would take him through one of the business districts that heroes regularly patrolled, so staying on the rooftops would be counterproductive.

Yet sadly, because it was a shit night, he ended up running into the heroes anyway.

It was the sound of his cape flapping in the wind that gave away The Blade's presence above Theseus. The wet fabric snapping in the warm air had the vigilante springing into a dive roll before he was even able to register why. The sound of metal meeting concrete behind the teen sent a spike of adrenaline through his veins.

The Blade chuckled as Theseus whipped around to face him. "Hey there Theseus, been falling off of any roofs lately?"

Behind the vigilante, the sound of a boot splashing in a puddle forced Tommy to quickly turn so both heroes could be seen in his peripheral view. Behind him was a woman in red and pink body armour, sword glinting dangerously in her hand. At the mouth of the alley behind her what appeared to be rose vines were growing rapidly, weaving into a wall to block off his main escape route.

"Pretty neat trick huh?" The Blade asked. "Scarlet Thorn and I haven't worked together much before, but what's the point of a rainy day if not for a little shared patrol with The Captain's agency?"

Tommy bit his tongue and kept his silence. It was part of his whole vigilante persona, to be as different as possible from his boisterous civilian identity.

Originally he hadn't even bothered with a codename, wanting to stay so unknown that he wouldn't need one. But after their first battle, The Blade had bestowed him with the title of Theseus when it ended with Tommy getting kicked off a roof. The only reason he lived to fight another day was a last-second teleport clutch from Ranboo.

Slowly he reached his hand to the communicator on his belt, just barely managing to hit his SOS button before a rose vine shot out, snatching the thing and crushing it to little pieces. Not that it really mattered, Tubbo knew what he was doing. Someone would be here, all Tommy had to do was hold his own until then.

"We know about your little partnership with EndWalker," Scarlet Thorn said coolly. "It won't matter anyway. The Blade's powers might not work on you, but they'll work on him." Her eyes narrowed and Tommy couldn't help but be impressed by the strength of her waterproof eyeliner, unmoved by the rain and highlighting her dangerous pink eyes.

The Blade snorted. "Sadly for you, backup doesn't help much against me when I'm expecting them."

Tommy grimaced under his modified airsoft mask. They knew too much. It was bad enough that they knew Ranboo's codename and about them working together. It meant that someone was actively investigating and collecting information on them, which was not great. What was even worse was it was now a cross-agency case, instead of simply being contained in Tempest or The Captain's agencies alone.

Tommy moved first, knowing that the standstill could only last so long. He reached for the collapsible staff hidden by his oversized black and red hoodie, opening it just in time to block The Blade's sword. He pushed with all his might to knock the blade aside and turn to block

Scarlet Thorn's attack. It was only when he was met with a series of rope-like vines that he realized one unfortunate reality: there was no getting out of this without using his powers.

Not giving himself the chance to overthink it, Tommy ripped off a glove and threw caution to the wind, diving straight for the heroine. It wasn't like he had never used his powers in a fight, but he had never used them on a hero. Sadly, his only choices seemed to be giving them more information on him or going to jail that night, so the decision wasn't that hard.

Scarlet Thorn yelped in surprise, raising her sword to defend herself instead of more vines, most likely confused by Theseus's direct attack. It was exactly what Tommy needed as he blocked the sword's blade with the staff in his gloved hand and reached the uncovered one around to where she gripped the sword's hilt.

The second their skin met Tommy activated his powers. He could feel the strange pressure in his skull, threatening to build into a headache if he held the power too long. Immediately all the vines in sight began to crumble to dust, creating an odd plant-based sludge in the puddles around them. Scarlet Thorn stood, frozen in shock as the vigilante used it to sprint past her.

He could hear The Blade hot on his tail as he made a b-line for the buildings across the street. He drew his grapple gun and shot the line in a fluid motion so fast that he was already in the air by the time he noticed EndWalker and Amnesia on an adjacent rooftop.

He risked a glance to confirm that The Blade was in fact not pursuing him. He caught a glimpse of the soaked red cape and bone white boar-skull mask turning back into the alley. Tommy released his power and allowed a small sense of relief to seep into his chest as he sprinted and made the jump to the next rooftop.

Without a word, EndWalker offered him a hand and the world dissolved. To Tommy, it was the feeling of being violently dunked through a tank of carbonated water, shook up and shot out the other side in less than a second. To everyone else, it was described as *'a very disorienting sense of vertigo.'*

The moment his hearing and vision cleared he could hear Tubbo already in the middle of lecturing him. “—better not have just accidentally hit the SOS and turned it off without calling it in again! I've told you a million times we have systems in place for a reason—”

“It was The Blade,” Ranboo interrupted their friend's tirade, causing Tubbo to freeze. “He was fighting The Blade.”

“And Scarlet Thorn,” Crumb—the vigilante Amnesia— added, feline tail flicking water off behind her, “from The Captain's agency uptown.”

Tommy turned to see Tubbo seated at his desk, a practical wall of monitors mounted in front of it. The brunette boy grimaced, “Well that's shit,” he frowned. “You good boss man?”

Tommy sighed and shook his head. “They know too much about Ranboob and me, it's only a matter of time before they start catching on.”

“Hey! I told you to quit calling me—”

“Surely not,” Tubbo spoke over Ranboo. “They only know that the two of you are working together, that’s no reason to believe there’s a bigger network. You two are the most well-known of us anyway, so we shouldn’t worry too much about it, yeah?”

“The Blade saw that I was with them too,” Crumb admitted weakly from where she was stripping off her soaked body armour. “He’s not stupid, they’ll catch on sooner or later if we keep getting caught rescuing each other.”

“Yeah the villains are already starting to get it,” Ranboo added. “Slime said that HBomb and Spade have both had to save him from fights with Hellcat recently. If Hellcat’s gang knows about vigilantes working together it’s only a matter of time before others start realizing.”

At Tubbo’s distressed look Tommy found himself saying, “We’ve had a good run of it Tubso, but we all knew this wouldn’t last forever. We’ve just gotta start planning ahead for this kinda stuff, yeah?”

The desperate look on Tubbo’s face implied that he would have kept arguing his losing case but was saved from doing so by an insistent beeping. He sighed and turned back to the wall of screens, scanning them and typing for a minute while they all stood back, stewing in troubled silence.

“Speaking of villains,” he sighed, “there looks like there’s a small arms deal going down at the docks, any of you want it?” Tubbo offered.

“Pass,” Ranboo answered, flopping down in an extra chair next to the desk.

“Yeah, no. Sorry, but I should be heading in for the night right now anyway. Never did like the rain,” she giggled, damp cat ears twitching as she packed up the last of her gear.

Tommy rolled his eyes. “Fucking pussies. I’ll take it,” he huffed. “It’s on the way home for me anyway.”

Ranboo and Tubbo groaned while Crumb snorted.

“You always say stuff is on the way home no matter what side of the city it’s on,” Crumb giggled.

“Just admit that you’re homeless already,” Tubbo begged, clapping his hands together in a prayer motion. “You can just stay here! I’ll help you pay for food or something.”

Tommy smiled under his mask, heart warmed by his friend’s exasperated yet genuine concern. “It’s a tempting offer, Big Man, but I’m not homeless so you don’t have to worry about me.” Not that Tommy hadn’t spent nights in their little abandoned apartment complex hideout. Sometimes he needed out of a foster home faster than the social workers could get him, but that didn’t make him homeless.

Tommy saw what it was like for people on the streets every night. How hard it was to get even the most basic of necessities for day-to-day life. His situation sucked, yes, but it wasn’t

worse than what the streets had to offer. Despite everything, Tommy did actually want to have a chance at a future outside of vigilantism.

Tubbo and Ranboo both offered him exasperated expressions, not looking like they believed him for a second. It was fine though, they wouldn't push it. Most of the vigilantes in their network drew the line at discussing their personal lives and everyone else respected that boundary, not wanting anyone to push them in return.

They parted ways after that, Tommy heading straight for the docks and their twisting maze of shipping container stacks.

It wasn't hard to spot the arms deal from his perch atop the container wall. There were eight people in one of the corridors deep in the maze, two groups of four facing each other. If they had been trying to keep their meeting secret in the first place they were definitely blowing it now. From the sound of it, they were arguing loudly about whatever deal they had. Though by the looks of their drawn weapons it was going south.

Tommy considered leaving them to their own devices for a bit, taking on the winners once their internal fight was over. That was until he spotted a security truck in the distance. It was far enough away that the vigilante could probably take most of the villains before it got within shooting distance. Tommy had seen one too many security guards hospitalized or killed for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and he wasn't eager to repeat it.

Theseus used his grappling line as a safety, dropping down to ground level with ease. Immediately the argument ceased, a tense silence falling over the gangsters as they turned to glare at the vigilante. After a still moment, the shouting resumed with new power as they accused one another of double-crossing by calling a vigilante.

He rolled his eyes under his mask and got to work with his staff. The moment the fight began two obvious leaders suddenly decided that they would be fighting each other, leaving Tommy with the six lackeys to take care of.

He ducked under a punch from one, knocked aside another's gun and kicked a third square in the face. Tommy danced through their attacks like death was a dangerous game to him. Nearby the leaders, a dark-haired hybrid woman with horns and the Rooster-headed man, traded blows. The woman wielded a sword with deadly precision while the man swung a wicked-looking machete. It was only once the vigilante had four of the gangsters on the ground, the remaining two about to meet the same fate, that shit really went sideways.

Around the corner appeared the security truck, most likely drawn in by the sound of commotion. Tommy barely had a second to register it was there before the truck exploded, shooting up into the sky and crashing back down in a fiery blaze of screeching metal and broken glass. At the opposite end of the alley behind him, the sound of manic laughter erupted.

Tommy turned slowly, his heart dropping as he saw the tail end of a purple portal closing behind the group of reinforcements. There were an extra twenty men, standing at the ready with their powers activated and guns at the ready. The horned woman took a step backwards, making it obvious that it was her backup.

“Sorry boys,” she gloated, “but I don’t think any of you are walking outta here alive. Not you gunrunners and not you, vigilante.” Her glowing purple eyes locked onto Theseus and he began to internally curse himself out.

He didn’t grab a new communicator from Tubbo before he left, which meant no backup.

Like he wasn’t already having a shit night.

“No Styx, it is you who will not be leaving here alive,” the rooster man boasted. Seconds later every shipping container above them had a gunman with an automatic assault weapon trained on all the opposing gangsters. “One does not simply betray my trust and get away with it.”

How Tommy had missed two dozen men hiding on top of the shipping container stacks was beyond him. *What the fuck.*

Then it *really* went to shit.

Guns fired and powers activated. Shipping containers were exploding the same way that the truck had while bullets and superpowered projectiles rained down from the sky like hellfire. In Tommy’s two and a half years as a vigilante, he had never been caught in a firefight of this calibre. He decided then and there that if he could go the rest of his life without ever seeing a battlefield like this again, he would die happy enough.

As it was, he was dodging and weaving through the violence like a madman. The gangsters seemed more focused on trying to kill each other than the vigilante but it didn’t stop them from taking potshots any time he came within range.

Around him men fell, they screamed and shouted. The sounds of explosions and heavy gunfire were almost deafening. Bullets grazed his arms, the force behind them nearly enough to knock him off his feet. A throwing knife narrowly missed hitting him, just barely scratching his shoulder instead. Superpowered projectiles and energy bolts were thrown with abandon, hitting shipping containers, splintering the concrete and severely injuring anyone unlucky enough to find themselves in the line of fire.

Eventually, Theseus made it to the base of one of the now fallen container towers. He was about to jump and make the climb to freedom when a stray bullet caught the visor of his mask. The force of it jerked his body sideways sending him sprawling on the ground while the bullet's destructive power sent shattered plastic flying into his eyes and face.

For a moment all Tommy could do was lay on the ground, frozen in panic and deaf to the world because *he almost just got shot in the fucking face he almost died—*

The sound of blood rushing in his ears and the fuzzy feeling in his brain kept Tommy from moving for what was probably far too long. He lay frozen on the ground of a battlefield, head pounding and injuries beginning to make themselves known. Even with everything happening around him Tommy was unable to think anything beyond: *holy shit I should be dead.*

Eventually, the feeling of cold rain mixing with the blood on his partially exposed face was enough to slowly bring Tommy back to himself. Finally remembering where he was he pushed himself up in a half-blind panic. He only registered the silence around him at the sound of a body hitting a puddle behind him.

Tommy turned to see that it was Rooster Head, laying face down in a pool of water while his body glowed with a sickly purple aura. The vigilante raised his head to see that every member of the gunrunner's gang had collapsed where they stood, the same purple glow surrounding them. All the members of the horned woman's gang were silent and still, watching as she glowed with the same purple energy.

The sound of the small glass vial slipping from her hand and shattering against the ground was louder than any gunshot fired just seconds before.

The teen watched in horror as he realized what her power was. Every collapsed body began to wither away before his eyes, dark hair turning white, faces ageing and drying out. The bodies shrivelling under their clothes until their dusty remains were soaked through by the rain, leaving nothing but sludge-covered skeletons behind.

The woman collapsed without warning and the quiet spell broke.

Then Tommy was *running*.

His stomach twisted in knots as he scaled the shipping containers again, sprinting past the still clothed skeletons of gunrunners. The sound of shouting in the distance spurred him further on into the rainy night.

That could have been him. It *should* have been him. She knew he was there so why didn't she use the power on him too? She obviously didn't want him spared, based on the way that her men were chasing after him. Maybe she thought he was already dead, seeing as he had practically been shot in the head and didn't get back up. Or maybe it was his powers. Usually, he was only immune to the effects of mental abilities but The Blade's power didn't work on him either, so maybe it was like that?

He didn't know, but his mind kept racing as his body went into autopilot, carrying him through the city's alleys in an evasive pattern to ensure he lost his pursuers.

Ender, how many people just died? Thirty gangsters and two security guards? Over some stupid guns?

Tommy was a big man. The biggest really. He had seen his fair share of death but *nothing* like that. Even his nightmares had never presented him with such a horrific concept. But he knew that he'd never be able to sleep again without seeing bodies wither to sludge in the rain.

Lightning flashed over graffitied alleyways as Tommy decided it was safe enough to start ditching his gear. He took a long winding route, far from his current apartment in case any gangsters spotted him. The shattered mask went into a dumpster. The bloody hoodie into a pile of soaked and split trash bags. His utility belt and items from his cargo pants pockets

went into a gutter drain. After some debate his staff followed, just in case a hero stopped him, insisting he go to the hospital for his obvious injuries.

By the time he made it back to his neighbourhood his head was pounding and he was shivering uncontrollably. He may not have taken any direct hits but it didn't change the fact that he was losing blood from the deep bullet grazes and cuts.

What a shitty fucking night.

Now, Tommy would be the first to admit to himself that what happened next was stupid. He had years of experience as both a foster kid and vigilante that should have saved him from the predicament he ended up walking into. But if anyone else ever tried to ask him? It was bad luck, he never could have seen it coming and neither would anyone else, because Tommy was the biggest of big men and nobody could ever outdo him.

Any other night, he would have found it concerning that none of the other foster kids were in the room when he entered. He would have found it strange that the lights were on in the kitchen and he would have napped out of there in a second. However, as it was, he was exhausted and in pain and his only goal was to get to the first aid kit in the bathroom to clean up his injuries. Hopefully, he could stop the bleeding before he passed out from blood loss or an adrenaline crash.

Any other night he would have heard the voices over the sound of the bathroom fan. He would have noted the muted footsteps of three strangers entering the apartment alongside his guardians. Any other night he wouldn't have sat frozen on the bathroom floor, hands shaking as he tried to hold a gauze pad against his bleeding calf. He wouldn't be mentally reciting the lyrics to his favourite Bruno Mars song to drown out the memories of withering bodies in his mind's eye.

It wasn't until a knock sounded on the bathroom door that Tommy realized that he had screwed up. "*Thomas?*" his foster mother called, voice oddly pinched. "*Is everything alright in there?*"

Tommy froze, the nearly tied bandage slipping from his shaking fingers to the floor, undoing all his hard work in seconds. "I'm— I'm fine!" he stuttered rather unconvincingly.

"*Are you decent?*" she asked, the door handle already turning, "*I'm coming in.*"

The door slowly swung open, revealing both the woman and the small black handgun she had trained on the teen. Her dark expression was broken through with a blink of surprise before smoothing back into a poor imitation of sympathy. Her gaze wandered over him, dissecting every injury, every weakness, that he had.

The gun did not waver as she spoke. "Don't make this any harder on yourself than it has to be Thomas," she said, voice full of fake understanding. "It looks like your night has been rough enough as it is."

Tommy decided at that moment that he despised guns.

Not even a week ago he had been pestering Tubbo about giving him a gun as part of his vigilante kit, only half kidding. Now Tommy was pretty sure he might throw up if he ever had to point a firearm at another person. He had been on the business end of guns before, obviously, but never to the level of helplessness he'd experienced tonight.

An unstoppable army of automatic assault rifles versus a handgun in a bathroom. Somehow they instilled the same sense of sickening fear in him. He *hated* it.

He said nothing as he struggled to his feet, faking complacency as a plan formulated in his head. The window with the fire escape wasn't far from the bathroom, but it was in full view of the living room and would give someone plenty of time to shoot him if he made a break for it. Laura— Laura?— backed up, leading Tommy into the living room where four men stood, body language casual and weapons still hidden. On The coffee table rested two expensive-looking armoured briefcases.

Fuck it, he thought.

Tommy made a wild dive at Laura, closing a hand around her wrist and forcing her arm upwards as the shot fired. He used his superior size and weight to shove the small woman out of his way and sprinted to the closed window. He threw it open and got halfway through before a hand closed around one of his forearms.

He slid the rest of his body out onto the rusty fire escape and tried to lever his arm free by twisting towards his captor's thumb. Sadly all he received was the crushing grip tightening enough that he felt something in his forearm give, pain lacing up every nerve in his arm and causing him to choke down a scream.

Tommy didn't even hesitate to activate his own powers, cancelling the suited man's strength. But he wasn't fast enough to escape before the man gave his arm a hard yank. Tommy's whole body jerked forward and his head slammed into the window frame, making his ears ring as his arm went numb.

The vigilante reached his uninjured arm through the window, grabbing his captor's fingers and twisting until they gave. The boy jerked away from the window, swaying slightly as his head swam and vision blurred. He made it all of two steps when the familiar *vwoop* sound of an enderman hybrid teleporting made him turn, just in time to meet the man's knife with his stomach.

The suit-clad hybrid's eyes widened as he let go of the knife handle, obviously not expecting to have actually hit Tommy. Tommy himself was rather surprised and he stumbled back two unsteady steps until there was nothing else to step on. He fell down the fire escape's ladder onto the closed dumpster lids three stories down.

After that everything was a blur of pain and panic, only flashes registering in Tommy's exhausted mind.

Shouting and gunfire in the building above him.

His foster mothers' voice arguing with a man he didn't know.

More gunfire.

People shouting his name in the distance.

A familiar alley mouth marked by a mural of the city's first vigilante, Blackwing.

Rain. Thunder. Flashes of light fighting back the darkness gathering in his eyes.

A familiar back door of a familiar bakery.

Cold.

Pain.

Then blissful darkness.

Wilbur despised rainy night patrols, and he had told Niki as much at least three times, to which he had only received a light laugh and teasing.

“I’m serious!” He complained, “Ignoring the fact that half of my costume is leather, who would be committing crimes outdoors right now? And I know you’re gonna say people with water powers— but then why do I have to be out here? You’re more than capable of kicking their butts without my lame ass!”

Niki's laugh was light and carefree over the pounding sheets of rain. “Maybe I just enjoy your company Whisper! Plus you know rainy days have to have patrol pairs, it's too hard to get back up in case something does happen.” Her smile widened as he rolled his eyes under his goggles, “Besides what better duo is there than Nix and Whisper! Nothing better than a little water and mind control!”

“Literally nobody says that! Ever!” he argued, unable to mask his own laughter.

They wandered along the rooftop patrol route in comfortable silence, keeping aware of their surroundings all along.

It was nice, patrolling with Niki again, rain notwithstanding. Recently his hero work had been a string of highly classified cases that involved undercover work and intelligence gathering. It wasn’t that he didn’t enjoy hero work, it was every kid's dream, sure. But it was hard, the way he came into it.

And time only made it harder. The silence, the lying, the isolation that all came with his underground work. The occasional patrol with one of his oldest friends was a nice change of pace, even if he was soaked to the bone.

Eventually, Niki’s bakery came into view across the street and Wilbur smiled. She had been doing a lot better since opening the place a few years back, cutting down on her hours as The Water Hero, Nix, and putting in more time to what she loved: baking.

His smile shifted into a smirk as he elbowed his companion. She looked at him, eyes sharp and ready until she spotted his expression and frowned. “What?” she asked, tone wary.

He jerked his head in the direction of the bakery with a grin, “Got any good leftovers we could steal? Maybe find a dry overhang to hide under and wait for baddies to do something stupid?”

She eyed him for a moment before shaking her head with a wry grin, “Fine, but only because you look like a wet cat.” She grinned at his indignant squawk and pouted, “Poor baby, all soaked by the rain—”

“Shut it! I’m gonna steal twice as many pastries now—”

“No! We’re not gonna go in if you argue—”

“What? You want me to agree that I’m a wet cat—”

The two heroes continued to bicker about pastries and wet cats as they made their way down to ground level. They crossed the street and slipped into the small alley that led to the bakery's back door, too caught up in their bickering and laughter to notice the collapsed figure next to the door until it shifted, making a pitiful noise that immediately silenced the heroes.

They moved with practiced ease, Nix moving in first with her powers activated as a shield until she was close enough to see the figure's face. To Whisper's surprise, she gasped, dropping the shield with a splash and rushing to the person's side in an instant.

Whisper blinked, dumbfounded. “Nix what—”

“Tommy! Tommy, can you hear me?” She scooped up the body and Whisper finally got a decent look at him.

He was young, too young to be passed out alone in a rainy alley. His probably blonde hair was darkened by water and dark streaks that must have been blood, if his batter face was anything to go by. His skin was pale and his body shivered, even in unconsciousness. His black clothes were soaked all the way through, clinging to his lean frame and revealing the tears in his pant leg and long sleeves. Whisper had already called in an ambulance before Nix could even find the source of the bleeding that turned the puddles around them red.

Whisper moved side by side with his partner, pulling out first aid supplies and putting pressure on the major wounds they could find. “You know this kid?” he asked.

“Just after I got my hero license, my parents fostered him for a few weeks as an emergency placement,” she replied, voice dangerously close to shaking. “When I opened the bakery he used to work opening shifts for the extra money, just helping out wherever he could.”

Whisper hummed, in acknowledgement. “Can you think of any reason he would get into this kind of trouble? Anyone that might want to hurt him?”

Nix shook her head without taking her eyes off the boy, pink hair dripping. "He's always been a trouble magnet, but not this. He's a good kid, he could never deserve this..." she trailed off, hands definitely starting to shake.

Wilbur took a deep breath, burying how shaken he felt seeing Niki like this in the field. Wilbur himself had been in a similar position in front of her several times, an unfortunate side effect of your family also wearing the mask. But Niki didn't lose her cool in the field, not for anything. Not that he blamed her, it wasn't looking good at the moment.

"He'll be fine," he reassured her. As if to punctuate his point the sound of the ambulance could faintly be heard over the sound of rushing winds and water. "He looks like he's probably a pretty strong kid, to have made it this far out. Smart too, going to a place he knows."

Niki said nothing, but the shaking in her hands lessened. Eventually, she offered a resolute nod in reply, letting the approaching sound of the ambulance sirens speak for itself.

Everything was a rush once the ambulance arrived. They quickly reported the injuries and moved to allow the paramedics to take over the boy's care. After a moment of deliberation, both the heroes were loaded into the rig behind the now occupied gurney.

"No point in freezing in the rain," the paramedic argued. "You'll have to stay on his case until we know what happened, anyway."

The ride to the hospital was silent, aside from the too slow beeping of the heart rate monitor.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Tommy wakes up.

Whisper and the police try to put the pieces together.

Chapter Notes

I hath declared that Saturdays will be update days, it shall be so.

This chapter's style is a bit rough but I'm tired of looking at it. I hadn't really been writing a lot before starting this, so the earlier chapters are a bit rough around the edges. Still, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy awoke slowly.

On one hand, he was glad that he was able to wake up at all.

On the other hand, everything hurt, which was not a pleasant way to wake up.

The first time he awoke was to the sound of people speaking urgently, though the words were lost to him. He was only awake long enough to wonder where he was before the darkness closed around him.

The second time he awoke was to the sound of hushed arguing, the deep accented voice of a man he did not know and the soft lit of a familiar woman's voice, though he was unable to place it in the moment. He could barely hear them from across the room— *room what— where was he—* but picked up every few words. “*Identity—*” “*immediate family—*” “*no—*” “*please just go—*” Eventually the noise was soft enough to pull him back to sleep.

The third and final time he awoke, things hurt considerably less. His head was no longer swimming, the lights no longer hurt his brain, he could hold his eyes open without much more trouble than usual.

He sat up as quickly as he dared, nearly giving up at the spike of pain from his abdomen. But he determined to take in his surroundings.

Tommy was alone in a hospital room, still connected to an IV and a heart rate monitor. He looked at the window, wondering if it could be used as an escape route before realizing it didn't even open in this room. He looked at the door and sighed. Tommy knew from personal experience that the moment he removed the heart monitor his room would be swarmed by people, meaning that even if the door was unlocked, he had no way out.

Not that he could make it out in the state he was in. The stab wound in his side screamed at him for using his abs to sit up. Gingerly he lowered himself back down.

He sighed and took stock of his injuries, trying to remember where they all came from.

His ribs ached, but they weren't broken. His left arm and wrist were in a cast, probably broken by the man that grabbed him through the window. His nose was in a splint, most likely broken from the bullet his helmet had caught and the faceplant that followed. His left leg was slightly raised in a ceiling sling and propped up by pillows, his ankle in a cast. Aside from all that he could feel stray plasters and stitches all over his body from smaller cuts and grazes. One of the effects of getting caught in large villain battles he supposed, having no clue where the injuries came from.

Though the memory was hazy he was certain that the broken arm and ankle were the result of his foster parents and their strange buddies in three-piece suits attacking him—

Wait a second.

His foster parents attacked him. The worse half of his injuries were from his foster parents. His foster parents, who were low-level drug dealers that deserved jail time regardless. He actually had a reasonable explanation for his injuries. He didn't have to worry about escape because this was a civilian Tommy Innit problem, not a vigilante one.

Holy shit.

His thoughts were interrupted by the slow opening of the room's door, revealing four people. A doctor in scrubs and a white coat, a hero, in full costume, and both his foster parents, fake expressions of worry plastered on their faces.

"Oh *fuck* no! Absolutely not!" Tommy shouted, fake fear (yes it was fake, shut up) in his voice.

"Thomas, the doctor and I are just here to help—" the blue-clad hero started.

"I know that dumbass, but get them away from me!" he cried, gesturing at them with his unbroken arm. "They're the ones that did this to me!"

All the adults in the room froze. He resisted the urge to smirk as the two idiots made '*deer caught in the headlights*' expressions before switching to poorly concealed anger.

"Thomas!" Laura cried indignantly. "How could you say something like that! You were gone all night, we were searching for you in the rain for hours!"

“We spent all that time searching before reporting you missing,” her husband said, looking annoyed, “and you have the audacity to lie? To say we could do such a horrible thing?”

Tommy grit his teeth, internal smugness snuffed out. He glanced at the hero. He only had one chance to argue a better case than Laura and her husband. If they really did report him missing, then they had a problem, because that is what a responsible foster parent *would* do. How could he prove that what he said was half true?

He could tell the hero to search their apartment for illegal substances or signs of gunfire. But they wouldn't be able to enter the place without a warrant, and the two undoubtedly had time to clean up by now. They wouldn't file a report without covering their tracks.

His throat felt tight as his gaze flicked between the doctor and hero. He had nothing. No way to prove what he said was true because he hadn't even managed to get a good hit in, leaving an obvious mark to point out. All he could do was plead and hope that for once in his life it worked out.

“I'm not lying,” Tommy managed, swallowing hard.

“Yes you are,” Laura stated firmly. She turned to the hero, “I'm so sorry sir, but Thomas has a history of lying and violence, it's all in his foster records. You can ask any of the other kids, it had been almost a full day since any of us last saw him. He was gone the morning before.”

Unfortunately, that was partially true. Tommy had woken up early that day and left to get some extra snacks for their communal room food stash. When he came back everyone else was gone and didn't return before he left for patrol.

“This is probably a result of gang violence,” her husband added. “Thomas has had a habit of sneaking out at night since he came to stay with us. When we tried to confront him about it he attacked me. I was afraid that if we pressed or got the authorities involved it would put the other children in danger so we dropped it.”

That was *not* true at *all*. If they really did notice him sneaking out they never brought it up.

“That's not true—” Tommy's voice cracked and he didn't bother continuing. His eyes burned and his throat hurt, the last thing he wanted to do was cry in front of these assholes.

Apparently, he was not doing a good job at hiding how upset he was. “How *dare* you just turn on the waterworks,” Laura accused, her own voice thick with fake emotion. “After everything you did to us, *put* us through, you're going to sit there and play the victim?” her voice cracked at the end.

Damn, she was a good actor. Nobody had ever tried this hard to sell Tommy out when he didn't do it.

Even though he knew every word that came out of their mouths was a lie, it still hurt. Maybe it hurt because he knew it was a lie. Either way every second this conversation continued suddenly made Tommy feel more drained. He was just so fucking tired of the adults in his life pulling shit like this, abusing their position as his guardian or superior and using it to fuck

him over. The gratitude he felt for the universe allowing him to wake up again was starting to turn sour. A coma would have been much better than this.

He fixed his eyes on the hero, resolutely ignoring Laura and her husband. His expression hardened as he forced the tears down. "If you're going to believe them over me," he choked out, "then you're just another shit hero. If you want to take the easy out to just get your paycheck and go home, then get the fuck out."

The hero tensed. For a moment the whole room was dead silent, it felt like nobody dared to breathe as the hero studied the injured boy. The man sighed audibly behind his mask, stepping between Tommy and the foster parents. "Mister and Mrs. Blackwell, I think I'm going to have to ask you to step outside with me. I'd like a quick word, if you don't mind."

Tommy's heart sank. At least the hero had the decency to consider what Tommy said before giving up on him. And it was nice that he was doing what Tommy wanted, getting out before he took the Blackwells fabricated statements.

The couple turned without question, filing out of the door while the hero hesitated for a moment, turning to the doctor. "Would it be possible for you to put out a lockdown order?" he asked quietly.

The doctor blinked in surprise and looked back at Tommy, who was completely immobile in the bed. "I could," the doctor said slowly, "but I don't think the young man will be going anywhere anytime soon. It seems a bit unnecessary--"

"It's not for him," the hero cut him off sharply. "But they don't know that so keep it quiet if you can, yeah?"

The doctor's face was stuck in a wide-eyed look of surprise and he nodded mutely. The hero left the room and the man pulled a small device from his belt, typing something on it quickly. He finished and pocketed it, turning to fix Tommy with a curious look.

"Fuck you," Tommy croaked, making the man chuckle light-heartedly.

"I suppose I owe you an apology for making that assumption," he admitted. "So I'm sorry, that was very rude of me." He moved to the foot of the bed and picked up a clipboard that hung there, flipping through the sheets of paper casually.

"You just believe him?" Tommy asked, wondering how someone could just put so much trust into another person's opinion.

"I've worked with Whisper on a few cases like yours," the doctor said, moving to fiddle with the machines in the room, "he has yet to ever be proven wrong when he picks a side in an argument like that. So I trust his judgement." He paused to look down at Tommy again, "Should I not have? He wasn't wrong was he?"

"No." The two were quiet as the doctor moved around the room, adjusting things and checking his clipboard. After a minute Tommy couldn't help but ask, "Why is such a high-

rank hero working on my case?" He hadn't even recognized the costume, though he had noticed a number of heroes getting new gear recently.

The doctor smiled at his confusion. "Whisper and Nix were on patrol when they found you. They were in the ambulance with you when you arrived. Whisper hasn't even left the hospital yet, he's just been doing paperwork and reports here."

Tommy blinked. "Oh."

The doctor laughed. "Don't worry about it too much, they've both always had a soft spot for kids in danger." He moved slowly over to Tommy's bedside, "Why don't you try to get some rest?" he suggested, "You're probably still tired from all the healing. I just need to use one last round of my power on your more serious injuries. After that, you'll be able to leave in a few more days."

As much as Tommy wanted to argue that he was in fact a big man, not a kid in danger, he *was* extremely tired. Plus he figured starting an argument with the guy that wanted to heal him was probably counterproductive, so he stayed quiet, settling back on the uncomfortable hospital bed.

As bad as the whole day or so had been, it could have been much worse. He could have died, obviously. Would have died if the two heroes hadn't found him. He could have had his secret identity discovered, have gone to jail for the rest of his life. Or Whisper could have believed the Blackwells and had him thrown in juvie while they investigated his supposed crimes.

But he was alive, he could live to fight another stupid fight, live his dangerous life after he heals. If he even wanted to.

It was a shitty day, but it could have been worse.

Wilbur resisted the urge to laugh as he watched the detective get completely shut down for the third time that day.

The first time had been when the poor man attempted to interrogate Laura and Jason Blackwell after they were brought into the station with Whisper as their escort.

After confronting them in the hospital he asked them to come to the station with him willingly, which they refused. When they argued that they wanted their lawyers involved and to press charges against Thomas, he tried to arrest them. This resulted in Jason panicking and pulling a gun, which quickly resulted in both of them behind bars and enough reason to search the apartment.

The detective interrogated them on everything from what happened with Thomas Innit, to their illegal weapons, to the stash of second-rate cocaine in their apartment, to why they even had foster kids to begin with. Every single question that the detective attempted to ask them was met with either silence or putrid insults and language. At the time it hadn't been all that funny, just annoying seeing as Whisper also would have liked to get the answers.

The second time he got shut out was when they went to a different room in the police station to question the other four foster kids about what they knew of the Blackwells' operation.

The three teenagers refused to answer anything about the night their foster brother was attacked, they wouldn't even confirm if they had been in the building or not. When asked if they knew about the drugs found in the apartment they gave thinly-veiled replies that basically meant, *yes, but I didn't want to end up on the streets, please stop talking to me.*

The eleven-year-old was far more forthcoming with information but sadly nothing relevant to their case. She complained that the night of the attack the Blackwell's made her sleepover with the old man next door, which she always hated because he was 'creepy'. It ended up leading to the justified yet concerning arrest of the neighbour as well.

This led up to their current predicament, where detective Smajor was currently being shut down by their main witness and victim, sixteen-year-old Thomas Innit. Scott looked like he was about five seconds away from having an aneurysm and Thomas looked like he was about to bite the next person that got within six feet of him.

"Kid, *please*," the detective pleaded.

"I am not a child!" Thomas retorted, tone laced with fire.

At the very least it was good to see the kid in better spirits. Though, if this roiling ball of anger and yelling was the boy's natural state it only made Wilbur feel worse as he remembered what their first conversation had been like. If he hadn't been there he would never be able to imagine the teen on the verge of tears, begging someone to believe him.

He sighed, deciding it was time to step in. "Thomas, if you would just *liste-*"

"My fucking name is *Tommy* and I don't want to fucking *listen* to anything you have to say! I'm fine! So just let me out of this damn bed and throw me back in the system! Stop pretending like you care!"

The detective's jaw dropped as he stared at the vicious boy. Wilbur put a hand on his shoulder, trying to silently convey *I got this* as he stepped closer to the bed.

"*Tommy*," he corrected, reaching up to push his tinted goggles off his face. Wide blue eyes met brown as the goggles settled in Wilbur's hair. He took another step closer to the bed before crouching next to it, "First of all, I'm not pretending to care, I *do* care. I haven't spent the last week hanging around here to get updates on your condition because they pay me to, I technically *lost* money doing that. Nobody deserves what you've gone through. I just want to make sure you're alright and that it doesn't happen again, okay?"

Tommy stared at him like he had grown a second head, which Wilbur supposed in his mind he may as well have. He doubted many people had ever shown genuine concern for the kid before. Much less strange pro-level heroes.

"I'm gonna need an answer from you bud," Wilbur said after the boy made no move to acknowledge what he said.

“Fu-fuckin’ whatever,” the teen muttered after a moment, gaze flicking to the far wall and staying there.

Wilbur studied the kid for a moment, collecting his thoughts. He noted that Tommy was strangely well built for someone so obviously malnourished, but he supposed that if the kid made a habit of sneaking out down broken fire escapes he probably did a lot of climbing at night. Lord knows Whisper had met his fair share of inner-city kids whose only source of entertainment was night parkour. Sadly he had met half of them while calling an ambulance after they missed a jump.

The boy was laying very stiffly despite his injuries, indicating that he was most likely uncomfortable with their presence in his room. Or maybe he was just uncomfortable being in the hospital at all, nobody liked long hospital stays if they could avoid it. Best to finish this up quickly then.

“We arrested your foster p-”

“If you say parents I’m gonna fuckin’ scream,” Tommy muttered, still focused on the wall. “Those idiots were *not* my parents of any kind.”

Despite himself, Wilbur smiled under his mask, he could appreciate the kids’ spunk at the very least.

“We arrested Laura and Jason Blackwell and can keep and charge them for the drugs we found in their apartment, but we’re still missing most of the pieces from the night they attacked you,” he explained. “All we need from you is a detailed statement and to answer whatever questions the detective comes up with. After that, we’ll be out of your hair. Sounds good?”

Tommy’s gaze flitted back over the detective and Whisper, studying them with obvious distaste. “Why don’t you just use your powers to make me tell you? I’ve been annoying enough haven’t I? Aren’t I obstructing justice or something?” His blue eyes locked with Wilbur’s with an almost challenging look.

Ah. So that’s what it was.

It wasn’t uncommon for people raised in poor communities to distrust the police and heroes. Honestly, Wilbur would even agree that in most cases there was justification. After all, vigilantes existed for a reason. They were heroes of the people that rose up to protect their own communities when law enforcement failed, even if it meant breaking the law themselves. It meant that the whole case would be this challenging, nobody wanted them meddling.

“I don’t use my powers on civilians,” Wilbur promised. “We just need your side of the story. Something isn’t adding up and I think you might have the answers, even if you don’t know it.”

Whatever Wilbur was expecting him to do, it wasn’t for the teen to completely freeze up. Just as Wilbur was beginning to panic, thinking he unknowingly hit a nerve Tommy slowly began

to relax, still studying him, searching for something. He must have found it because a moment later he slowly began to speak.

“Fine... what, uh, do you want to know?”

“Why don’t we start with when you came back into the apartment,” the detective asked evenly, stepping forward again to speak with the boy. “Laura said that you had snuck out the previous night, is it true?”

The boy sighed and glared at the wall again. “Not exactly.”

“Can you elaborate on that?” the detective asked after an awkward pause.

Tommy’s face twisted into a frown. “I left early in the morning the day of the incident. Everyone was asleep and I went to the local corner store to buy snacks. I stayed out all day, doing odd cash jobs for a couple of local businesses. When I got home it was dark and nobody was there. I made dinner and snuck out again around midnight.”

The detective nodded, pen scratching at his notepad for a moment longer before he looked back up. “And what were you doing after you snuck out at midnight?”

“I don’t see how that’s relevant,” the teen spat at the wall.

“We just need to confirm that the claims of your relations with gang violence were false,” Scott clarified.

Tommy turned his glare back on them, jaw visibly clenched. “I was at a party down on 23rd street. I don’t associate with gangs, thank you very much.”

Scott held his hands up in surrender, “That’s all we needed to hear for that, thank you.” He jotted down a few more notes.

Wilbur resisted the urge to grimace at how tense the poor kid was. It would definitely make his injuries hurt more later, but there was no getting out of this conversation. They were still flying blind and needed anything Tommy could offer.

“Can you tell me what happened after you came back to the apartment? What time was it? What did you see before the fighting started? Anything out of the ordinary you can remember?”

Tommy closed his eyes with a sigh, his body slowly releasing its tension as the teen took a few controlled breaths. The hero and detective waited patiently while he gathered his thoughts.

“When I came back I didn’t see anyone and made a b-line for the bathroom. I was— I was a bit too preoccupied throwing up to pay attention to my surroundings until Laura opened the door and had a fuckin’ *gun* pointed at me.” His eyes opened and he stared up at the ceiling, visibly swallowing. “She led me out of the bathroom at gunpoint. In the living room, I saw Jason and three men in very stupid, expensive-looking suits. There were two briefcases on the coffee table.

“It, uh, probably wasn’t the best choice, but I was drunk. I body-checked Laura and she missed her shot. I made it out on the fire escape and one of the suited dudes grabbed my arm so hard he broke it. He smashed my head into the window but I slipped away. Then turned around just for another one to stab me. Every- everything’s a bit of a blur after that. There was a lot of gunfire and shouting but I can’t really remember how I got away.”

Scott nodded along, writing notes furiously. All Wilbur could do was stare at the kid.

Tommy was beyond lucky to be alive. His drunken decision to body-check the woman with a gun very well could have been his last, yet somehow he survived. Not only that but he got out with a major concussion, broken nose, arm, ankle and ribs and five bullet grazes that the doctors guessed were caused by a high calibre assault weapon and a handgun. He even crashed on the operating table twice yet here he was. It may have been dumb luck but damn was the kid stubborn.

Of course, his combined intoxication and concussion still left some questions unanswered. Like, how did he break his ankle? Where did the plastic shrapnel in his face come from? How had someone with an assault weapon failed to hit a drunk and concussed teenager that was bleeding out? Still, even without those answers, they had a lot more information than before.

“That sounds like it must have been very scary,” the detective consoled. “You’re very-”

Tommy scoffed, “Just ask me the next fucking question.”

Scott blinked and frowned. “Can you describe the men you saw? And tell me what the briefcases looked like?”

“The guy that broke my arm was blonde, about 6’ 2, 200 pounds. The one that stabbed me was an enderman hybrid, purple eyes, dark as a shadow, teleporting power. He was short for an enderman hybrid, though, about 6’ 1.” Scott scribbled furiously while Tommy frowned at the wall. “I don’t really remember the other one, sorry.”

“That’s alright, can you tell me about the cases?”

Tommy nodded. “They were silver. Armoured briefcases with handcuffs attached to the handles. Definitely the kind of shit you’d see in a movie, the kind that villains would carry the very important drugs or shit in. Maybe money, I don’t know.”

Wilbur couldn’t hide his snort. Tommy immediately turned a glare on him. “Fuck you.”

“Sorry,” he chuckled, “but *‘the kind of shit you’d see in a movie’*?”

The boy rolled his eyes, “Well it’s not like I’ve ever seen what the *real* villains keep their expensive drugs in. Like I said, I’ve got no gang ties.”

Wilbur raised his hands in defeat, “Fair enough. Not trying to say you do, but thank you for the clarification.”

“You’re a bitch,” Tommy declared.

Wilbur couldn't help but laugh in return. "Whatever makes you feel better, kid. Though just so you know I'll only ever tolerate being called a bitch by an injured child."

"Fuck you! I am *not* a child!" Tommy shouted, causing Wilbur to laugh even harder while the detective sighed wearily.

The apartment was a mess of crime scene markers and police tape when Whisper, detective Smajor and the forensics specialist returned. The detective and forensics guy immediately began searching the apartment for any sign of the briefcases Tommy had told them about. Wilbur made a b-line for the kids' bedroom.

Technically he was here on the off chance that a hero would have a better chance of grilling the neighbours for any information they didn't already know. In reality, Wilbur had joined the expedition because he realized all of Tommy's worldly belongings were still in the apartment.

So he was a little attached to the gremlin, sue him. It was hard not to be when Wilbur could remember being in his exact position. Stuck in the hospital getting hounded by every adult that spoke to him, trying to get him to answer endless streams of questions when all he could wonder was '*will I get my backpack back?*'.

And yes it was a little different. Wilbur had been eleven at the time while Tommy was a much older sixteen. Wilbur had been the direct target and goal for a violent gang, Tommy was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Still, Wilbur could empathize.

One of the other foster kids had mentioned that they knew Tommy wasn't trying to run because he left his red bag in their shared bedroom, so at least Wilbur knew what he was looking for. He pushed his goggles up into his hair so he could scan the dim room for a red bag. When a few good look overs resulted in nothing he started moving stuff.

Eventually, he found the bag by complete accident. Frustrated by the lack of results he was having he accidentally pulled too hard on one of the splintered dresser drawers. The drawer slid completely out with a loud thud, revealing the flat red bag stuffed between the floor and the bottom of the drawer.

Smart, Wilbur thought to himself as he gingerly retrieved the bag. It was a black and red backpack, one of the straps had completely torn away from the bag at the bottom and it looked as though the other wasn't far behind. For a moment he thought the bag was unzipped but as he went to close it he noticed the small line of safety pins holding the thing together. Through the partially open top, he could see the contents of the bag: some faded clothes partially burying a beat-up cow plush and an old brick of a laptop, the charger tightly coiled around itself and thrown on top of everything else.

It was depressingly sparse but Wilbur was sure it would make all the difference to Tommy.

After he found the bag he spent the rest of his time trying to do his job, asking anybody in the building that was willing to open their door questions about the Blackwell's and any

connections to the men in suits. Predictably nobody was forthcoming with information and those that were had nothing of use.

Eventually, his companions found him on the first floor, having completed their mission with far more success. Apparently, they were able to find metal residue on both the main doorway where they think one of the cases was scraped and under the Blackwells bed where all their drugs had been stashed. Wilbur wasn't sure what they could do with just the metal residue, but the detective seemed satisfied for the first time all day so he kept his concerns private.

He rode back to the police station with them to deliver the statements he had taken to the young intern in charge of organizing all the files for the case.

Wilbur frowned as he took in the *very* young-looking intern. His bright green eyes and fluffy brown hair made the hero wonder why he was working with the police. "Are you even old enough to be working this internship?" he couldn't help but ask.

The intern looked up at him with a mischievous grin. "Under average circumstances, probably not," he admitted. "But I'm an upper-year student at Prime Academy which is a pipeline-

"-Pipeline school into all careers police, law and hero related," Wilbur finished, nodding in understanding. "I know, I graduated from there too."

"Oh yeah you did, didn't you? Sorry, I always forget who's on the '*esteemed alumni*' list," he chuckled.

Wilbur snorted, "No worries kid, so do I." He considered just leaving it at that before saying, "If you don't mind my asking, why are you interning here? Do you want to be a desk jockey for the rest of your life?"

The teen blinked at him before snorting, "No, definitely not. What I really want to do is intern at The Warden's hero agency in the support engineering department, but he doesn't accept interns without at least two references. Over the summer I interned at the Punz hero agency in their support department. So first term I'm interning here and second term I'll apply for The Warden's agency."

Wilbur couldn't help but grin at the kid's enthusiasm, "Getting in the practical experience and the paper-pushing skills, very smart" he praised.

The kid smirked. "I know," he stated confidently, making Wilbur laugh.

"What's your name kid?"

The boy hesitated for a moment before answering with a grin. "Tubbo," he said. "And you're Whisper, from Tempest's Agency."

Wilbur nodded. "Tell you what Tubbo, when you're putting out your internship applications for next term, make sure to send one over to Tempest's agency. A smart ass brat like you

would fit right in with our team.” The teen burst out laughing and Wilbur winked. “It was nice meeting you Tubbo,” he called over his shoulder as he turned, waving a small salute.

“Have a good day Whisper!” he called back as Wilbur turned the corner. The boy disappeared from his line of sight just in time for Wilbur to miss the troubled look Tubbo aimed at his back.

Tommy was staring at the bag in his lap like he couldn’t believe it was real. As tempted as Wilbur was to tease him about the dumbfounded look on his face he refrained, knowing it would be better to let the kid speak first.

“This is my bag,” Tommy stated eventually, eyes still locked on the pile of fraying fabric in his lap.

“Yep.”

“You... found my bag.”

Wilbur couldn’t help but snort, “Obviously.”

Tommy shot him a withering look before his expression was softened by confusion. “You went back to the apartment... to find my bag. And bring it to me.”

“That’s what I said, kid. I don’t remember your concussion being this bad though, should I get the doctor?” he asked, half-joking.

Tommy rolled his eyes, the soft spell over him finally breaking. “I’m not a fucking child, and it’s not my concussion. I’m fine. I just-” he trailed off for a minute, eyes straying back to his bag. “I’m surprised you knew I didn’t have anything.”

For a moment Wilbur considered keeping the conversation light with bickering banter before leaving. Instead, he said “Let’s just say that once upon a time I was not in a very different position from where you are now. And when it was me, nobody bothered to go back for my bag.”

That got Tommy's attention, the boy’s head shooting back up with a searching look. Wilbur found himself wondering if Tommy found what he was looking for when he looked back down at his bag muttering a quiet, “Thanks, Whisper.”

Wilbur grins under his mask. “You’re welcome, Child,” he teases, already knowing the rise he was about to get.

Tommy's face scrunched up immediately, “I’m not a *fucking child* -”

Sorry for the filler, but I just couldn't resist all the brotherly bickering.

Any thoughts or theories? And man, what's Tubbo doing there, I thought he was a vigilante...

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Tommy gets out of the hospital.

The Blade gets dragged into an unfortunate case.

Chapter Notes

Hi sorry for the late update. I just moved to a new apartment over the weekend and still don't really have wifi, so updates may be a little irregular until that is fixed. I also did not really edit this so rip.

But on the plus side, no wifi means no TikTok, which means more writing. So lucky you, readers.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Here let me help you—”

Tommy battered away the social workers' hand. “Piss off.”

She scowled. “Manners, Thomas.”

He grunted, pulling himself from the vehicle with a few twinges of pain as the movement pulled at his stitches. “It’s Tommy,” he corrected with a sour look.

They glared at each other for a moment before the woman rolled her eyes, turning away towards the group home. After a moment Tommy hobbled after her.

Thanks to a team of doctors with medical powers his injuries had healed considerably since he first arrived at the hospital, but they still made him too vulnerable for his liking.

His once casted ankle was now in an orthopedic boot that required enough muscle that it made his legs burn to walk on too long. Even with the crutches. His arm was still in a cast and breathing through his nose still stung. It was hard enough to hold your own in a group home on a good day, and Tommy was not going to be having a good day for quite a while.

He found himself wondering if Whisper ever stayed in a group home before realizing that was a stupid train of thought and quashing it.

“This is a temporary place to stash you for the day,” the social worker explained as they slowly made their way to the front door, “We’re looking to get you an emergency placement for the night, hopefully until we can find a more permanent solution.”

“Oh thank fuck—”

“Thomas!”

He scowled, “Sorry I meant *oh thank Ender*, or thank *Prime*, is that better?” he asked, voice dripping with sarcasm.

She sighed, the sound deep with disappointment. “There is one other boy here that isn’t staying for the night either, someone will be back for you both once we have a couple of emergency placements that can handle your injuries. So just behave, alright?” They arrived at the door and she turned to face Tommy. “Mary-Anne is a very kind woman for offering to let you stay for the day, so don’t do anything untoward.”

Tommy gave her a mocking salute with his casted hand, “Yes ma'am,” he muttered unenthusiastically as she opened the door and he ducked in after her.

The front door led into a small entryway. Ahead was a short hall that led to what seemed to be a kitchen, next to that door was a stairway that went to the building's second floor. To the left was a closed door and to right was an open doorway that led into a living room.

A woman— introduced as Mary-Anne— ducked out of the closed office for a rushed introduction and greeting. After barely even a minute he was shuffled off into the living room to sit on the couch as wait.

Resigned to his fate, Tommy retrieved his phone the moment both women were out of sight, before remembering that it was still broken with a disappointed sigh. If only Whisper had also found his burner phone stashed in the baseboard behind the bed.

For the moment he was alone in the living room, but when he closed his eyes for a moment he could hear every noise in the building. Mary-Anne and the social worker’s voices muffled by the door, the sound of some younger kids upstairs playing heroes, the deeper timber of some older boys talking in the kitchen, the light footsteps of someone in the hall pausing by the doorway-

“Tommy?” a familiar voice asked incredulously.

Tommy's eyes shot open, head whipping to the doorway because there was no way it was-

Tommy stared for a moment, before deciding it was real. “Ra-Ranboo?” a beat of silence. “What the fuck?” his friend only laughed nervously in reply.

It was weird seeing Ranboo in this setting. Ninety percent of the time when they were hanging out they were decked out in at least half vigilante gear and talking about literally anything but their personal lives. Not that they weren’t friends outside of the vigilante game *now*, but they had known each other in a professional setting as allies long before they saw

one another without the masks. Lines had been drawn in their relationship before they even knew each other's names, and one of those lines was ever mentioning their home lives.

In all honesty, it wasn't surprising that Ranboo was also a foster kid. One didn't just become a vigilante at the ripe age of fourteen without some tragic reason. What Tommy was most surprised by at the moment, was the older boys' fashion choices.

"I never took you for a Hawaiian shirt kinda guy Ranboo," he admitted, unable to look away from the loud orange shirt.

"I— Jesus Tommy, what the hell happened to you? A week of radio silence and I finally see you in a *group home*, looking like you were in a *car crash*? Are— are— are you *okay*?" he stammered.

Tommy looked up to the hybrid's face, surprised by the concern in his tone, only to be met directly with a mismatched gaze of red and green. Ranboos' expression was so loaded that for the first time ever Tommy was the first to look away.

"I could ask you the same thing big man," he deflected. "What's with the sling and the bruised jaw?" He said, nodding towards Ranboo's obviously injured right arm, resting in a wrist brace and sling under the Hawaiian shirt.

"It's— if I tell you, will you tell me what actually happened to you? Not just a stupid '*I fought a lion*' or something?" Tommy definitely wasn't avoiding his friends' gaze, it was just that the ratty old carpet was suddenly interesting.

Now Tommy was a big man, the biggest really. And as cool as he thought it would be to make up a badass story about what happened that night— that he fought all top ten heroes and won, or saved a whole bus of supermodels— he also knew that in the long run, it wouldn't be cool. Big men knew that it wasn't cool to make their friends worry, after all.

"Sure thing, Ranboo. Just tell me what I missed the last few days, mans has got to stay up to date with all the hot goss, yea?" He changed a look at Ranboo, forcing a sly grin.

Ranboo huffed a noise that sounded suspiciously like laughter before settling down on the couch next to him. Tommy would count it as a win.

"The official story is that I was sleepwalking and accidentally teleported to the roof and walked off," he answered with a sigh.

Tommy frowned, "And the unofficial story?"

Ranboo scanned their surroundings for a moment before he was satisfied enough to answer aloud. "I had a run-in with Dream. All things considered, I feel like it went well," he said, voice just above a whisper.

Tommy inhaled sharply, "Seriously? How did he even find you?"

He sighed. "Apparently they arrested HBomb a couple of weeks ago, Spade and Slime think that he slipped up and mentioned the network. I wasn't sure I believed that until he had me

and started questioning me about a vigilante called *Haywire*...”

“Fuuuuck,” Tommy groaned.

Haywire was Tubbo's codename. Tubbo, who never went into the field and never gave out his codename. He was the one that ran their little vigilante network, supplied them with tech and communicators, arranged patrol routes to avoid heroes and dispatched them to emergencies. Up until now the network and his involvement had been a closely guarded secret.

Most members of their group flew completely under the radar of the big hero agencies, sticking to small muggings and domestic issues without ever leaving a name or calling card. The heroes had no idea how many vigilantes there were in the city. But the reveal that there were even enough vigilantes to have a network, operating under a mysterious figurehead, meant that within the next few months they either had to disappear or keep operating with a huge ass target on their backs until they were all arrested and got to spend the rest of their lives in jail together.

Just great.

“Yeah, and I only got out of the hospital today so I haven’t had the chance to tell anyone.”

“Fantastic,” Tommy muttered.

“Mm-hm.” They sat in heavy silence for a few minutes before Ranboo finally broke it. “Please tell me your story is less of an imminent threat to our current way of life?”

He shook his head, “I wish I could, but my news isn’t much better.”

They spent the next few minutes discussing the abridged version of *The Very Bad Night*, as he had dubbed it. They took liberal breaks between discussing details as distractions flitted in and out of the area, from the social worker leaving and promising that someone would be back for them later to the older boys passing by the doorway on their way upstairs.

“So what you’re saying is that one of the gangs has a leader that can just kill people? Like without any pre-reqs she can just choose up to thirty people to suffer instant death?” Ranboo questioned, eyes wide.

Tommy nodded, “From what I gathered there must be a limit somewhere because she didn’t use it on me, but otherwise, yeah. Anyone could run into her and just die. Just clothes and bones left to identify”

Ranboo inhaled slowly. “That is not great,” he stated.

“Yeah, not really.”

“And there's some high-level suit gang with lots of money buying stuff from low-level coke dealers?”

He sighed, “Yeah, I overheard Whisper and Nix talking about it in the hall one day, they raided the Blackwell’s apartment and found lots of crappy drugs, but nothing that should

interest suit level gangsters. I... I don't really know. I think it might be best to leave that one to the heroes, this stuff is starting to get above our paygrades."

Ranboo snorted, "Ya think?"

"Shut up."

They sat in relatively comfortable silence after that. Or, as comfortable as they could be in a group home. Together.

Okay, maybe it was a little weird that he didn't know Ranboo was also in the system. Tommy could count the number of times they had hung out without masks on one hand and the number of times it was just them with none. It was weird that he could say without a shadow of a doubt that he trusted Ranboo with his life, yet hesitated to call the boy a friend outside of their dynamic with Tubbo or body armour.

Or maybe he still had enough of a concussion to make him sappy, thinking about bitch-boo being his friend. Ranboob was a bitch who came in and stole his best friend, Tubbo. It's not like the taller boy had saved Tommy's life so many times he lost count. He was still a lanky ass bitch.

"Tommy..." Ranboo started, breaking him from his thoughts.

"What?"

He could feel Ranboo studying him from the corner of his eye, "Please tell me you're gonna let this go. Your injuries are gonna take weeks to heal and they're not the kind you can just mess around with. If you don't take care of a broken ankle you'll be forcibly retired within the next five years cause you won't be able to run anymore. If you mess around with your arm too much you won't have the grip strength—"

"I get it! I get it," Tommy interrupted. "I know, proper recovery is very important. Yes, these are the worst injuries I've ever had without a healer." He sighed, "besides, I don't really want anything to do with the scary death lady *or* the creepy suits. I may be the king of living on the edge in danger-town but I'm not *actually* suicidal. Like I said, leave it to the heroes, it's above our paygrade."

Ranboo studied him for a moment longer. "And you're not gonna push your injuries at all? You'll take a break, a *real* break, to rest and heal?"

"Well, I didn't say *that*—"

"*Tommy*—"

"Fine! Fine, yes. I'll take a break from patrol until I am properly healed. Christ, happy now?"

He turned to see Ranboo giving him a flat look, "I'll only really be happy when you actually follow through on that, but it's a start."

Tommy scoffed, "You calling me a liar, bitch?"

“What? No! I’m just saying that you have a history of ignoring your injuries and-”

“Ran-bitch—”

“Tommy! I’m serious—”

“Bitch-boo—”

Ranboo barked out a laugh, “Dude what—”

“Ranboob—”

“Hey! I told you not to call me—”

Tommy finally lost it, collapsing into a fit of pain-filled laughter as the movement jarred his injured ribs and pulled at his stitches. Ranboo was not far behind, his own laughter muffled by a hand covering his mouth.

After a moment Mary-Anne appeared in the doorway and told them off for being too loud before disappearing back into her office. They apologized profusely to her while hiding the pain in their bruised ribs and stab wounds. The moment she was gone Tommy took a deep breath and groaned, head tipping back against the couch as he closed his eyes for a moment, willing the pain to ebb away.

Beside him Ranboo grunted, shifting on the couch to presumably accommodate for his injuries.

“I’ll take it easy Ranboo, I promise it’ll all work out, yeah?”

His friend sighed. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep Tommy.”

Tommy grinned, “I’m not. It’ll be fine so long as I get a decent house placement.”

“Yeah except you don’t have a choice in that. Your last placement was drug dealers that tried to kill you.”

“That just means that my bar for decent is low.”

“That’s not a good thing, Tommy.”

“Whatever.” After a moment’s hesitation, he risked a look at Ranboo, who was staring intently at the wall. “How— uh— how many different placements have you had?”

Ranboo frowned, “Three. I’ve only been in the system for two years.”

He’d only been a vigilante for two years by Tommy’s count. Checks out. “Those are some long-ass placements,” he says instead.

Ranboo glanced at him and looked away again before answering. “I do actually have a sleepwalking problem along with my memory issues so... I don’t know. My medical issues

mean they have to give me well-tested homes or something. Though, at all three they sent me off for the same problem. My issues were too stressful to deal with in their households, apparently.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” After a pause, Ranboo spoke hesitantly, “How many places have you had?”

Tommy snorted, ignoring the twinge of pain in his nose at the action. “Lost count. I’ve been in the system since I was five. My longest placement ever was eleven months. Guess nobody likes a loudmouth scrapper that can’t sit still or stay out of trouble in school.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

He shrugged, “Whatever, I’ve long since accepted my fate. I just kinda feel bad for whatever nice family they’re about to burden with me. I have a tendency to piss off nice people very fast but they’ll have nowhere else to put me that’s safe for my *injured state* .”

Ranboo snorted, “I’d say they’ll probably try their best to find a good place for you buuuut...”

Tommy chuckled, “Not the best track record to rely on, eh?”

“Yeah, but I do hope it works out for you. You’re, uh— well, you—”

“Spit it out big man, haven’t got all day.”

“You deserve better,” Ranboo finished, making Tommy blink in surprise. “You’re a good person that does nothing but put good out into the world and all you get in return is shit. So— yeah, you deserve better.”

Tommy felt his face heating up at the— the what? Compliment? Praise? Whatever it was he wasn’t used to it and didn’t like it making him look weak, blushing like a schoolgirl.

“Whatever Ranboob,” he deflected. “Got any games on your phone?” he teased in a silly imitation child's voice

They laughed so hard that Mary-Anne had to come back in and threaten to separate them again if they couldn’t quiet down. Which led to a much quieter and more painful round of chuckling at being scolded like the loud kids in class, despite them being nearly adults sitting in a living room.

Eventually, they calmed down, Ranboo passing out on Tommy's shoulder for a nap and Tommy stealing his friend's phone to play Minecraft. Yes, pocket edition sucked, no he had never played the PC version, yes it was better than no Minecraft. In his younger years, he dreamt of getting adopted by a rich family that would buy him a PC. Now he had to settle with the reality that if he wasn’t in jail by twenty, he’d have to wait till then.

But it was peaceful. When Ranboo woke up Tommy politely ignored the awkward air and promptly found himself nodding off to sleep after the phone was reclaimed, leaving him with

nothing else to do. If Tommy had been asleep against Ranboo's shoulder when a new social worker finally returned for them, neither of them would ever mention it.

If there was one thing The Blade hated, it was getting called in for investigative cases without any kind of explanation.

Sure, many other heroes would agree that it was important to maintain confidentiality for cases, that talking about it over unsecured or even secure lines was a risk. Techno could get behind that in theory, sure. In practice though? Half the time when he got a call from Vulpines agency the questions Fundy had to ask were either stupid or things he could have found the answer for himself. He was damn tired of it.

So when he got another request for a meeting about a case, The Blade decided that it could wait until after patrol and ignored the message.

It wasn't even half an hour before Dream found him.

"Do you just hate working with Vulpine or did you know it was my case he wanted to discuss?" The other hero asked, cryptically stepping out of the rooftop shadows.

"Does it matter?" The Blade replied flatly. Truth be told he had no idea that Dream was involved with whatever Fundy was working on. Now that he knew he was both more curious yet even less enthused.

"No," Dream replied. "But it's really important, so we should get moving." He turned without looking to see if Techno was following, taking off in the direction of Vulpines agency.

Techno frowned under his mask but turned to follow after a moment.

He caught up after a block. "Can you at least give me a hint about why I'm needed? It must be pretty important for you to be the errand boy tonight," Techno jabbed.

He could almost feel Dream's glare when the smooth mask turned his way. "It's about your vigilante case," he snapped. "And quit ignoring people meeting requests, your dad used to kick my ass when I did it so I'm gonna kick yours next time you ignore a case I'm involved in."

Techno snorted, "I thought you were about to threaten to tell him. It would probably work if you wanted to be that petty."

The other scoffed, "I'm not gonna tell him, that would be so childish."

"That's funny coming from the guy whose management team had to separate him from one of his team members cause you couldn't stop flirting in public—"

"You know what! Mind your own damn business and I'll mind mine!" Dream interrupted, shoulders tense. "Now's not the time to bicker about this. This case is messed up and I'm not

in the mood for banter.”

Techno frowned. It’s not like Dream was ever hard to read, he was the kind of guy that was as quick to anger and he was to laughter. It was part of his public persona, the carefree badass that was kind to his fans and ruthless to his enemies.

However, that's where his hero persona ended. Dream wasn’t the kind of guy to show any kind of discomfort when he was working, so him admitting that the case was no joking matter was a bit concerning.

They ran the rest of the way in tense silence.

When they arrived at the Vulpine agency the place was in chaos. It seems as though every employee was there, moving quickly around the bullpen of desks and rushing papers between the receptionists' desks, and any available printers. The stairwell doors opened and closed every few seconds, more people moving between floors with stacks of files and papers. Dream and The Blade made a b-line for the elevator and the busy crowd parted around them quickly.

They stepped off the elevator on the top floor, Dream leading Techno right to Fundy’s office, which was just as chaotic as every other room. The entire back wall had been turned into a case board, covered in mug shots and blurry surveillance photos. Affiliate heroes and sidekicks flitted in and out of the office with files, conferring with each other and adding more faces, names and photos to the wall.

They moved through the chaos to Fundy, who was bent over his desk sifting desperately through files and loose papers while more were piled on top.

“Found him,” Dream called out as a greeting.

Fundy’s head shot up, relief on his face visible since he was maskless. “Oh thank Prime,” he sighed, tone weary. He looked back to his desk, sifting through papers again and pulling out files to stack in his free hand. When the stack was too large he held it out in their direction.

Dream sighed and stepped forward to take it. “Which meeting room?” he asked.

“The one on the third floor should be open,” Fundy answered, holding out another stack. Dream took it only to immediately dump it in Techno's arms. Techno turned his head to stare at Dream, who resolutely ignored him.

Fundy glanced back and forth between the two of them before rolling his eyes. He moved over to the computer and began to type, speaking without looking up. “I still need to grab some more files off here, so go get set up now. We’ll need a laptop from the tech lab and everything to set up the projector.” They turned to leave before Fundy added, “And guys? No fighting in my office please, this place is enough of a disaster as it is.”

“Oh please—”

“S okay Vulpine,” Techno interrupted, “I don’t fight homeless people.”

Dream rounded on him in a second, “Oh screw you Blade! I am not home—”

“Just go!” Fundy snapped, waving his hands in a *buzz-off* gesture.

Techno chuckled to himself while Dream stomped off towards the stairs, most likely to avoid an actual fight in the elevator. While their official duel from senior year of high school was their most famous, it was far from their last fight. Techno was always game to try and kick Dream's ass.

Thus began Techno's least favourite part of working with Fundy: the damn waiting.

Vulpine was a good hero with an excellent investigative agency, which meant that he often had far too many cases going at once. While tonight was certainly the busiest Techno had seen the agency it was still completely unsurprising to see the rest of the employees sharing their boss's proclivity for chaotic disorganization.

It took almost an hour before they had everything organized. The first twenty minutes of which were Dream and Techno trying to track down a computer and the next ten setting up the projector and organizing the files Fundy had dumped on them. After that, it was all on Fundy, who took another twenty minutes before even showing up and spent the rest desperately moving files on the computer and reorganizing the stacks of paper ones.

Techno was about thirty seconds away from calling it quits and telling Fundy never to call him again when the other sighed. “Okay, I think I have everything,” he said, finally collapsing in one of the office chairs around the conference table.

He kicked his feet off the ground and rolled back towards the closed door, reaching up to activate the room's soundproof security measures. Pushing off the wall he rolled back to the head of the table and turned to look at Techno, “It's really important,” Fundy promised.

Techno glared at him, his boar skull mask now sitting on the table. “Considering I just missed most of my patrol to sit here and wait, I would hope it's important,” he said flatly, making the fox-hybrid's ears flattened against his head.

Dream sighed, the sound of his mask clattering against the conference table making both of them look up. The hero pinched the bridge of his nose, “There so much to brief him on,” he groaned, “so can we just do this? I want to go home sometime in the next month.”

Techno couldn't hide his smirk, “But you're homeless—”

“You know what Techno!” Dream nearly shouted, “I am *so* not in the mood—”

“Guys please!” Fundy interrupted. “Let's just start with the briefing, yeah? Can we not kill each other for five seconds? Please?”

Dream offered a long-suffering groan in reply, head tipping back against his chair.

Techno frowned. It was unusual to see so many heroes this frazzled over one case. Or in general, really. Wilbur had been pretty frayed the last few times he saw his brother. So had Niki and Jack. He kept his silence and nodded at Fundy to continue.

Fundy sighed and moved to the computer, pulling up a picture of a hybrid woman with dark hair and small cow horns. The photo looked like it had been taken from a surveillance camera while the woman got out of a car, flanked by two men in suits.

“This is Moo Gae'meers, better known as the villain Styx. She's the leader of a gang called *The Death Totems*. My agency has been tracking their movements for the last few months after mysterious deaths linked to them started popping up around the city.”

He clicked to a new slide. This picture showed a chicken hybrid, the man was wearing a red suit and his head was that of a barred roc rooster. This photo was a mugshot, though he looked immaculate despite having just been arrested. “This is Jacob Bates, he was the leader of the Rooster’s Head weapons dealers. Dream’s agency had been tracking their branches and dealings in an effort to eventually have a coordinated takedown of their entire operation.”

The slide changed again, to a paused video from a security camera at the shipping yard's storage lot. In the frame were two groups of five facing each other with a significant gap between them. The group on the left was headed by Styx, while the group on the right was led by Bates.

“This is the security footage we managed to recover from the shipping yard where they had a rather violent altercation.”

Techno watched with reluctant attention while the groups seemed to spark an argument. His attention became rapt when a new figure entered the fray. “Is that—”

“Theseus?” Dream finished. “That’s what we wanted to ask you. You were the last one to report a sighting of him, and earlier the same night nonetheless.”

Techno frowned, studying the vigilantes fighting style. It was definitely Theseus, there were very few people that could move like him. Despite being over six feet tall he was extremely fast and acrobatic. And while he looked like a skinny kid, he was as strong as a world-class rock climber and hit just as hard as any affiliate hero.

In Techno’s informed opinion Theseus was most likely a teenager, or at least he had been when he started. Their first meeting had been over two years ago and there was no denying that the vigilante was now noticeably taller than he had been. That had been The Blade's real reason for joining the vigilante hunting task force, to get the kid off the street one way or another. It didn’t matter if he scared him off or arrested him, so long as he kept the stupid kid from getting himself killed.

“It’s him,” Techno confirmed. His hand tightened into a fist in his lap when a nether portal appeared in the frame, depositing more members of The Death Totem. “Why’d you need to give me a whole briefing for just that?”

“Keep watching,” Fundy said, while in the footage more gangsters appeared, wielding assault weapons atop the shipping containers.

Techno kept his eyes on Theseus as the fight progressed. He had to stop himself from grinding his teeth every time the kid took a hit. Bullets grazed against his bicep, his thigh, his

side, his shoulder. A superpowered spike nearly impaled him. A knife grazed his arm. The vigilante was making a b-line for the now collapsed shipping container walls and doing a good job of it, all things considered. He dodged most of the attacks aimed his way and felled any enemy that risked facing him.

He watched as the kid paused at the base of the nearest container, starting to crouch when suddenly his whole body jerked to the side, following his head as the plastic faceguard exploded into shrapnel. His body tumbled a few feet across the concrete before coming to a stop, motionless as the fight continued around it.

A few seconds later Styx and half the men in the video began to glow a strange purple, some of them collapsing on the ground before the footage suddenly cut off.

Techno was tense, his eyes fixed on the still form of the vigilante. Across the table, he could feel the other heroes watching him.

“You alright, Techno?” Fundy asked after a moment of silence.

Techno took a moment before answering. “Playback the end again,” he said flatly.

“Blade...” Dream started hesitantly.

“Play. It.”

Fundy frowned but did as he asked, rolling the footage back to a few seconds before Theseus was shot. Techno watched with grim focus as the kid took a bullet to the face, body jerking to the side and sliding just as it had before. He grit his teeth hard enough to make his jaw ache.

“Where’s the body?” he asked.

“That’s the thing...” Fundy trailed off at the glare Techno shot him.

“You’d better not have called me here to ask me to find the bodies,” Techno growled.

“No,” Dream answered after Fundy failed to. “We found the bodies, but we’re having trouble identifying them.” Techno turned to look at him, nodding for him to continue. Dream nodded. “We believe we identified Styx’s ability as one that allows her to instantly kill her targets.

“Rumors have been circulating about her real identity and her relation to the rouge element known as Foolish, the totem of life. Foolish’s powers supposedly give him the ability to completely resurrect a dead person. We believe Styx’s powers allow her to do the opposite, by sucking the life force out of her targets.”

The slide on the screen changed again, showing an underwater picture of three partially destroyed shipping containers and half of a burnt security truck.

“This fight took place over two weeks ago, but nobody knew about it until this morning,” Fundy continued. “The Death Totems cleaned up all the signs of the fight in the yard, security only realized something was wrong when they went looking for one of the destroyed containers and found it missing. The police got involved when they realized two of their

missing persons were both security guards for the storage yard. When they found a day's worth of security footage missing they brought it to me.

"I ended up outsourcing some of the searchings to The Rocket Agency and Nix was the one that found this," he gestured towards the container underwater.

The slide switched again, now showing a temporary field lab with over two dozen tables set up. On each table rested a skeleton, most still wearing clothes. One wore a familiar red dress-shirt and had a giant bird skull in place of a human one. Looking at the bodies he recognized most of them from the surveillance footage.

"These were all found in the shipping containers, some of them in the mud around the area. Most of the skeletons were still intact and wearing clothes that matched the footage. We've spent all day running dental records and facial recognition to try and identify them."

The picture changed, showing a partial skeleton. About half the bones were missing, including the entire lower jaw and parts of the left cheekbone.

"This is the unidentified remains of a young man determined to be between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. The bones show the same signs of ageing and water damage as the rest of the identified remains. Based on the recovered portions of the remains it was determined that he was within the correct height range," Vulpine said.

"You once told me you thought Theseus was probably a teenager," Dream said to Techno. "Do you think it could be him?"

Techno frowned, thinking through all the information he had just been handed. It was a lot, but also not enough to make a conclusion. "I can't be sure. Show me the files related to Styx's powers, the identified remains and Theseus's relation here," Techno requested.

They spent the next hour going over all the files and information. Any time Techno had a question or theory about what wasn't adding up, Fundy and Dream showed new evidence or solid theories to contradict him.

The villains' power only worked on living people, seeing as some of the remains were whole and the cause of death was determined to be an injury. "But Theseus had been shot in the head," Techno argued.

"There's no guarantee he was completely dead before she activated her powers," Dream countered.

Fundy hummed in agreement. "Based on the way his mask shattered it's likely it was a graze to the face that destroyed his orbital and cheekbone," he added.

Techno bit the inside of his lip. If the headshot hadn't been enough to kill the vigilante right away, Techno wasn't sure he could think of a sadder death. Despite his activities being illegal, Theseus was well-loved by the city, having saved and helped so many people over the years. What he did was illegal, but that didn't change the fact that what he did was *good*. That

he was a good person. He was the people's hero, and no hero deserved such a slow and painful death.

Still, there was no guarantee it was him. So far it still seemed like a theory, and Techno was going to disprove it.

They read on.

“Every body recovered had items or markings that made them easy to identify, why wouldn't they do the same for Theseus?”

“To send a message,” Fundy answered. “Letting us identify the remains of their opposition and posting it to the news would be a warning to the remaining members of Rooster's Head.”

“And letting us identify Theseus wouldn't be a warning to the rest of the vigilantes?” Techno argued

“The vigilantes have been a major thorn in The Death Totems' sides,” Dream replied.

“They're a small group, and in the past, The Death Totems prefer to wipe out the small groups. Killing Theseus quietly would draw in more vigilantes like EndWalker or Amnesia to investigate and get caught in traps.”

Techno sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose to will away his oncoming headache. “Is there any other identifying mark we've found? Are we sure this isn't just another body that was already in the water?”

Dream scoffed, “That had the exact same level of ageing and damage as every other skeleton? As well as fitting all the descriptions? Don't you think that would be a bit coincidental—”

“There is more,” Fundy interrupted, sliding over yet another file. “One of my interns dropped this off just before you arrived.”

Techno took the file and examined the contents. It was photos of Theseus's vigilante gear, still soaking wet and numbered as evidence. The belts and tech were generic enough, but the staff was unmistakably his. The red spray paint, black sharpie designs and green ribbon tied in a bow had always been on his staff. No matter how many times The Blade managed to confiscate one of the vigilantes' weapons there was always new paint and stupid jokes written on the next one. The colour of the bow was different sometimes, sometimes there was more than one. But it was one of Theseus's staffs', no doubt about it.

The ribbon was burnt and covered in dark stains. One of the legible sections of sharpie said *if you're reading this, fuck you*.

He pulled out the report and read it, detailing that the weapons had been found in the water half a mile from the original crime scene and near the mouth of where the city's water drainage opened into the sea.

The next section had pictures of Theseus's shattered mask and black and red hoodie. The red of the hoodie was darker in places, stained with blood. According to the report both items had been found in the apartment of a recently arrested suspect. The DNA tests had no match in the criminal or superpower database but they matched on both items.

Techno examined a photograph of the inside of the mask. Written in the same silver sharpie along the lining was the small message *Don't die dumbass - HW*. From everything Techno had seen during the briefing, he had to admit that it didn't look like Theseus had been able to follow through on that.

He bit his tongue and slid the file to Dream, who was trying to read it discreetly across the table. Dream took it and examined its contents quickly, his expression morphing from curiosity to a grim frown as he read.

"So that settles it," Dream said after a moment. "Theseus is dead."

Fundy sighed, nodding. "There's too much evidence to argue otherwise. I hadn't seen that file until just now but it's the nail in the coffin for this part of the case." He turned to Techno, expression serious. "Blade, as the leading investigator in Theseus's case, with the most first-hand knowledge of the vigilante, do you agree with our findings? With all the evidence you've been presented with today, can you confirm that you believe the remains belong to the vigilante Theseus?"

Techno stared down at the mess of files on the table, an odd feeling settling over him. He had only taken over Theseus's case to avoid this outcome. To make sure the kid got to see his mid-twenties at the least. Yet here he was. He failed. He failed his mission and worse, he failed Theseus.

"I confirm that I agree with the findings and will sign off on the case. From this moment on Theseus's can be officially declared dead." He grit his teeth harder, the words tasting like iron in his mouth. "Now is there anything else you need me for, or can I go home?"

The other heroes shared a look, silently conveying something before turning back to The Blade. "We actually wanted to ask if you'd be willing to join the force tasked with tracking down The Death Totems," Fundy said slowly.

"You know, since you won't be on the vigilante-hunting circuit anymore," Dream added, sparking something strange in Techno's chest.

He may have failed to save Theseus from his own bad decisions. He was even partially responsible for how the young man died, considering he and Scarlet Thorn had broken his communicator, but that didn't mean he couldn't stop it from happening again. To save the next dumb kid from getting turned into a skeleton at the bottom of the bay. And hell, maybe a little revenge would be nice, not that he would ever admit it out loud.

The expression must have changed on his face because Dream broke into a sly grin. "You're in, aren't you?"

"Yeah," The Blade rumbled. "I'm in."

Chapter End Notes

Mmm Allium Duo for the soul. And The Blade? Has a heart? He kinda liked that kid, too bad he's dead...

Not my favourite chapter but I would have felt bad if I left you guys hanging for two weeks while my internet is messed up.

As always leave a comment to feed my empty soul. Any thoughts or theories? Or stories about the guy that was supposed to install your internet not showing up and saying they can't come back for another week?

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Phil has an interesting meeting with an old friend.

Chapter Notes

Shorter fluffier chapter this week, just some good old Dadza content.

Sorry if any of it feels info-dumpy, I just can't edit it anymore.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The chime of a small bell sang out across the cafe as the door swung open and Phil stepped inside. The barista behind the counter called out a familiar greeting to the man but otherwise, the rest of the shop ignored him.

It wasn't surprising, even if his identity had been public knowledge, it had been months since The Storming Hero, Tempest, was seen on patrol. Nobody was expecting to see him around. Though avian-hybrids might have been uncommon, they weren't *that* uncommon.

He moved to the counter, trading casual conversation with the barista while he ordered his usual drink and pastries.

He had just barely sat with his food when the bell chimed again, announcing the rushed entrance of his reason for being there, Clare Thomas, the social worker.

"Sorry I'm late," she said breathlessly, as though she had run to make their meeting.

"No worries," Phil replied with ease, "I know you're busy. You didn't have to run or anything, I would have understood."

She laughed nervously, "I know, Phil, I know. But this is important."

"Ah," he gave her a tired smile, "and here I was hoping it was just coffee between friends."

Clare offered a sheepish smile, "I'm sorry, but this is *really* important."

"You know my sons haven't been in the system for well over a decade, right?"

“I know. This isn’t about them,” she placated with a raised hand in surrender. “I know that you said you were done fostering after them, but I have a favour to ask of you—”

“No,” Phil cut her off.

“But—”

“No,” he repeated firmly. “This is what happened last time. You asked me to foster a couple of troubled kids with dangerous powers because of my connections with Tempest. It was an emergency that was supposed to last *two* months. You remember how that ended right?”

“Phil—”

“That favour ended with a city-wide gang war and two *legally required* adoptions. It was bad enough that I got attached but after *all that*, you had to take away my chance to adopt them as my own choice, I’m not doing this again.”

“I promise this time is different—” Clare pleaded.

“If you’re asking me for a favour then something big is happening with the kid and I want no part of it—”

“He doesn’t have powers, Phil!” She raised her voice enough that the patrons around them went quiet and eyed them curiously. Clare grimaced, “Sorry,” she said in a much lower voice, “but I promise it’s different.”

Phil sighed, considering while they sat in silence waiting for the cafe’s occupants to return to their own business.

Clare and Phil had gone to high school together, they had known each other for years and only grew closer as they lost many mutual friends to accidents and time. When Phil became the vigilante Blackwing she was one of the few people that found out and was still alive to keep the secret.

She didn’t have powers suited for hero work but she wanted to help people, so she became a social worker. Years later she came to Phil with two boys that possessed volatile powers, Techno and Wilbur, both of whom had trouble with power control on top of all their legal problems and trauma from the system.

As more of a personal favour to Clare than anything else, he took them in. He started training them to control their powers and somewhere along the way got attached. Of course, the moment he was attached, some villains learned about the boy’s powers and kidnapped them, leading to the most stressful months of Phil’s life.

It all worked out in the end, obviously. But Phil made a silent promise to himself that if he were ever to be put in the same position he would do it differently. Many mistakes were made — not that he regretted how it turned out, he wouldn’t trade his boys for the world— but they could’ve been avoided in a different situation.

But if this new boy had no powers, then why did Clare need *him* specifically.

Phil sighed, “Fine, I’ll bite. Why do you have to place this kid with me? Why not a normal placement?”

Clare relaxed as she jumped into her pitch. “It’s an emergency placement,” she explained, “a few days ago sixteen-year-old Tommy Innit was hospitalized after he accidentally interrupted his foster parent’s drug deal in the living room. They nearly killed him, and he’s going to be recovering from his injuries for about the next three months.”

Phil frowned, “And it has to be me why?”

“Tommy has no powers, which has led to a lot of bullying and abuse in his past homes. He’s currently barely mobile and will be that way for a while longer.” She took a deep breath and released it slowly, expression growing troubled. “I’ve been working with Tommy for almost ten years. I’ve been irresponsible with his safety in the past and put him into too many bad situations. He’s troubled, I won’t lie. Tommy’s rude and angry, he’s a flight risk and tends to punch first and refuse to apologize later. But it’s all a wall, I’ve known him since he was little and I know he’s a good kid, he just needs somewhere safe to recover.”

Phil shook his head, “Clare I can’t just adopt another kid—”

“I’m—I’m not asking you to adopt him. Sorry, I just—that wasn’t me asking you to adopt him, no. I just need you to look after him until his injuries heal. You’ve got the emergency first aid knowledge, you’ve got the space and most of all I trust you to not hurt him.”

When Phil’s skeptical expression didn’t budge she pushed on, “This isn’t like Wilbur and Techno. There’s no gangs after him, he doesn’t have any power that requires legal regulation or training. Just some anger and trust issues, which was the easy part of all that, right?”

Phil snorted at the thought, “Absolutely not. The easy part was training their powers, it took years after I adopted them to get past Will’s trust issues and Techno’s anger issues were just redirected.”

She opened her mouth, most likely going to try to convince him again but he stopped her with a raised hand, “I do see your point, though.” He paused, silently cursing himself for not just walking away when she said *I have a favour to ask*. He had a bad feeling about this but brushed it off as his paranoia. “Three months you said?”

She nodded slowly, like moving too fast would startle him into changing his mind. “Three months and I’ll come and do a check-in, if you still want him gone I’ll take him. If not, I’ll bring the paperwork for a long-term foster.”

“What, you think I’ll get attached?” Phil scoffed.

She smiled, “Well, Wilbur was supposed to be in a week-long emergency placement but you ended up fighting tooth and nail to keep him.”

“This is different,” Phil insisted, quietly hoping it would be true.

“If you say so,” she replied, clearly not believing it. “Regardless, three months, that’s all I’m asking of you. After that, we can talk and see where you’re at.”

Phil sighed. It was a bad idea, by all means.

He knew himself, and the likelihood of him getting attached to the kid was definitely above zero. But at the same time, his hero instinct couldn’t just ignore that the boy needed help. If Phil said no, who knows where he would end up? Powerless people were taken advantage of all the time, he knew the statistics of violent crimes committed against the powerless population. The abuse rates of powerless teens. The suicide rates. There was a good chance that if Phil turned the boy away, he could be dead within the year, one way or another.

Phil didn’t become a hero to pass up the chance to save a life. Even if he didn’t patrol anymore, his license was still valid and his training was ingrained. He couldn’t say no.

She must have been able to read it on his face as her expression brightened again, “Is that a yes?”

“Three months,” Phil agreed, “then we’ll see.”

Clare quickly rounded the table and surprised Phil with a quick hug. “Thank you so much, really. It will mean a lot for him.”

Phil rolled his eyes and patted her shoulder before she pulled away. “When do I need to be ready for him?”

She grimaced, “Tonight?” At his exasperated expression, she reminded, “I did say it was an emergency placement...”

He smiled faintly and downed the last of his coffee. “Well it looks like we better get going, you’ll still have to do a house check and I suppose I have some stuff to get for him.”

He would definitely need to get toiletries and such, probably some new sheets too. The guest rooms would have to be reorganized so that the upstairs one was usable... It was going to be an interesting few months. He didn’t even have time to warn Wilbur or Techno.

“Right, we should get going then. You still live in the townhouse, right?”

Phil's first impression of Tommy was that, whatever happened to the kid in his life, it was really, *really* shitty, and he definitely deserved better.

It was one thing to read about someone's problems on paper. To make assumptions about what their trauma could be, how it could present itself. It was another thing to look at that person, and to see how they have *actually* handled it. Somehow what he saw of Tommy was worse than anticipated, and he hadn’t even spoken to the boy yet.

Phil was currently standing on the front steps of the townhouse, watching as Tommy and the other boy, who Clare told him was named Ranboo, said their goodbyes. Clare said that as far

as she knew they had never been in a home together, which only made what Phil was watching a stranger.

They spoke in low tones, heads turned at an angle that made it impossible for Phil to read their lips. Their body language was tense and serious like they were ready to run or fight at any second despite their injuries. Ranboo glanced over his shoulder at Phil with a serious look. When their eyes met the teen didn't look away, red and green eyes searching Phil for something. Eventually, he turned back to Tommy.

Only a few more words were traded before the two parted with a soft fist bump and hardy pats on the others' shoulders. Ranboo helped Tommy retrieve his crutches and ratty old bag before opening the passenger side door, hovering as the other hobbled away.

"Stay safe, Tommy," he called without a trace of casualness or sarcasm. It wasn't a friendly parting phrase, it was a genuine request.

"You too, Ranboo," Tommy replied, equally serious as he made his way towards the stairs where Clare and Phil waited.

Something in Phil's stomach twisted.

That wasn't like any kind of interaction he had ever seen between school friends. That was the parting of allies, young men that had seen violence at each other's side and were committed to protecting one another from any harm. If Tommys split knuckles and Ranboos fist bruised jaw were anything to go by, both of them knew a thing or two about fighting. In all his years Phil had only ever seen that kind of comradery between his fellow heroes or the villains they faced.

Clare must have been wrong about them never housing together, they couldn't have that kind of solidarity any other way. Phil knew from personal experience how messed up the city's foster records could be, it wouldn't be hard to miss considering how many houses Tommy had been through.

Despite his concern, Phil forced his expression and body language to remain calm and welcoming. With how obviously wary Tommy was, the last thing he needed was to appear threatening in any way. If he scared Tommy off he had no doubt that Ranboo would come back and try to make Phil pay for it.

Throughout the whole introduction and tour of the house, Tommy was completely silent unless directly spoken to. He didn't ask any questions though he studied every room thoroughly, eyes scanning for exits and safe spots. Definitely a flight risk then. It didn't matter, Phil doubted Tommy was dumb enough to think that he'd have a better chance of recovering elsewhere. At least once Phil proved to him that it was actually safe here.

"As far as house rules go," Phil started, noticing as Tommy's posture tensed again, "there aren't many, and most of them are common sense. Don't go into other people's rooms without permission, that rule applies to everyone. Even I can't go into your room without permission unless it's an emergency. You can have whatever food you want whenever you want, you don't need to ask for permission. And no smoking or alcohol in the house, as well as

preferably no drugs outside of those that are prescribed.” He tried his best to catch Tommy’s eye, eventually, the teen glanced at him for a brief second. “Sounds good?”

Tommy nodded mutely, expression a little hazy. He was probably pretty tired from moving so much with his injuries.

“Alright mate, then why don’t we get you settled in your room? It’s on the top floor, but as you probably already noticed, we have a lift,” Phil said, nodding in the direction of the elevator by the stairs.

The boy nodded and the three of them made their way to the lift in the foyer, taking it up to the fourth floor.

Phil waited politely in the short hall while Clare had her final check-in with Tommy in his room. Due to the fact that the only other rooms on the top floor were Wilbur’s room and soundproofed studio, it would have been a bit hard to eavesdrop even if he wanted to. The talk only lasted a few minutes before Clare reappeared, closing Tommy’s door behind her.

“I left him your number and told him to text you if he needs anything. But he said he just wants to sleep right now,” she informed him.

Phil nodded as they stepped back into the lift. “He’s not what I was expecting, based on what you told me.”

She gave him a quizzical look. “What were you expecting?”

He frowned. “A tired and scared kid, not— not him. If that makes sense.”

“He’s definitely tired, but Tommy’s never been one to show fear, he usually just covers it with anger. He’s mostly worried that you’re gonna kick him out, he’s never lasted more than two weeks with a family as obviously wealthy as yours.”

“Oh Ender, it’s not *that* bad is it?”

She chuckled, “The exposed brick interior in the living room does make it homier but that doesn’t change the fact that you live in a four-story townhouse with an elevator and a home theatre behind the garage. Not to even *mention* that you live uptown by the lake.”

Phil sighed in defeat, “Yeah I guess the lake was a bit overkill.”

Clare grinned as the elevator came to a stop on the second floor. “Just respect his boundaries and show him that you care, he’ll come around.” The doors opened and they stepped out into the foyer, pausing before the front door.

“And if he doesn’t?”

“Then just keep him alive for the next three months, then he’ll be out of your hair.”

Phil ran a hand through his hair, ignoring the beginning of a stress headache behind his eyes as he opened the door for her. “Take care Clare,” he told her with a smile.

“You too Phil. Thanks again, really. You’re a lifesaver.”

He grinned at that, “That's what they pay me for.”

Clare waved as she made her way down the steps. In the driveway the sound of laughter made Phil step out on the porch to investigate.

While they were inside Wilbur had pulled into the driveway. He was currently sat on the hood of his car alongside Ranboo, a bag of fast food between them. Wilbur was laughing hysterically at something Ranboo was saying, his uninjured arm gesturing wildly.

Phil took a moment to appreciate how strange it was to see Wilbur sitting next to someone the same height as him, Techno came close but when they sat the length of Techno’s torso and Wilbur’s legs became apparent. Ranboo’s build was almost identical to Wilbur’s at that age, making Phil feel suddenly old.

Neither of the young men noticed the social worker until she was rounding the front of Wilbur’s car, which was unfortunate because her sudden appearance scared the shit out of both of them.

Wilbur yelped, accidentally throwing half his fries everywhere as he flinched while poor Ranboo almost fell over in his haste to stand up. He was already halfway through a rushed apology for not waiting in the car when Wilbur interrupted with a hasty greeting thrown to Clare and a goodbye to Ranboo.

Wilbur promptly sprinted up the stairs two and a time and vanished into the house behind Phil. Clare shook her head, waving one final goodbye before shuffling a sheepish Ranboo back into the car. Phil waved as the car pulled out of the driveway and shut the door behind him.

“*What the hell Phil!*” came the muffled yell from the kitchen at the back of the house. Wilbur appeared in the living room doorway to Phil’s right. “You could have *warned* me that my old social worker was at the house! Oh and thanks for the heads up about the emergency foster too, really appreciated that,” he said, voice dripping with sarcasm.

“I texted you, not my fault you didn’t read it,” Phil replied, moving through the living room into the kitchen.

Wilbur scowled and pulled out his phone, scoffing. “You then followed it up with, ‘*I forgot milk, can you get some*’ which was the previewed text in my notifications.”

“Maybe now you’ll learn to just read your texts when there’s a little red number.”

“Whatever,” he muttered, pouting as he plopped down on one of the island counter’s stools. “Who’s the unlucky soul that needed the protection of the great Tempest?”

“His name is Tommy and he doesn’t really need my protection, just a safe place to crash while his injuries heal,” Phil answered, pulling leftover pasta from the fridge to reheat. “Want

any?" He turned to his son, gesturing towards the tupperware only to be met with a wary expression. "Oh come on, it's not that old."

Wilbur blinked, "What— no, not that. I— The kid's name wouldn't happen to be Tommy Innit, would it?"

Phil frowned, tilting his head curiously. "You know him?"

"I— well, kind of. Nix and Whisper saved him after he was attacked. I visited him in the hospital a few times. He's an interesting kid, I just wasn't expecting... this." He swiped a hand through his bangs, eyes not really focusing on anything. "It's a good thing though," he admitted, "I was worried where he was going to end up, at least he'll be safe here."

Phil studied his son for a moment, taken aback by the oddly soft look on his face.

"You save kids in danger every day Wilbur, but I've never seen you care this much about their situations. He really clicked with you, huh mate?"

Wilbur immediately scowled, "No, absolutely not. That child is a gremlin, all he did was argue with us when we tried to get a statement and try to sneak out of the hospital the second he got the cast off. He is an evil demon spawn, we did not *click* or anything of the sorts Philza Minecraft."

Phil gave Wilbur the out by taking the bait. "Oh come on I played Minecraft *one time* and you two have never let it go!"

"You beat the game the first time you played it! Nobody does that!"

"You were telling me what to do! And *where* did the 'za' come from? What does that even mean?"

"Well obviously *Phillip* Minecraft wasn't going to cut it, doesn't have the same impact. Besides, it's just a show of love for you, Dadza," he cooed.

"Oh, shut it!"

"Dadza, dadza, dadza!" Wilbur chanted, dancing out of his seat when Phil playfully tossed the empty pasta container at him.

They continued to banter and bicker in the kitchen through the night, but it didn't distract Phil from the fact that Wilbur obviously had a soft spot for Tommy. He cursed his own mind for already trying to imagine how the boy would fit into their strange little family.

The next morning was a bit rough, though Phil knew it would be.

When Clare dropped Tommy off she also left Phil with a copy of his hefty medical file, though the only part Phil had bothered reading was the part pertaining to Tommy's current injuries.

When he arrived in the emergency room Tommy had been suffering from a severe concussion, internal bleeding, a four-inch deep stab wound, four broken ribs, cracked radius and ulna in his arm, shattered ankle, and numerous smaller injuries from bullet grazes to knife slices. Not to mention the severe blood loss as well.

On the operating table, he crashed twice and they were forced to call in a doctor with a power that allowed her to heal internal soft tissue damage. Once his concussion and internal stabbing injuries had healed they were able to pump enough blood back into the boy to keep him stable. To say Tommy was lucky to be alive was the understatement of the year.

Phil went on to read some of the doctor's notes on the case.

Under normal circumstances, they would have left Tommy to stabilize and heal on his own for a few weeks. Apparently, the police had pushed for them to wake the boy up as soon as possible. So despite some of the doctor's wishes, they brought in more specialized healing powers. One doctor that could speed up the healing process of bones, one that could kick start the healing of his external surface wounds and one more to give the boy's body an artificial energy boost so that all the healing didn't overwhelm him and make things worse.

So knowing how much of Tommy's recovery had been artificially supported by healing powers, Phil knew that over the next few days some of the boy's energy would wear off. The power's effects would fade and leave Tommy's body to heal on its own. Which would take more energy and most likely cause more pain than the teen had experienced since he awoke.

With all that knowledge, Phil was unsurprised when Tommy was barely coherent the next morning.

Phil balanced the tray that held a light breakfast in one hand and knocked on the door with the other. "Tommy! I've got breakfast and pain meds for you," he called out. "Can I come in?"

After a minute with no answer, he knocked again. "Tommy, can—"

A pained grunt from inside the room made Phil wince. "I'm coming in Tommy," he announced before slowly turning the handle and pushing the door open.

It was dark in the room, the heavy drapes drawn closed to block out the sun. Tommy was still laying on his back in bed, exactly as he had looked when Phil checked on him last night. Tommy's head turned towards the open door and Phil spotted the light reflecting off his eyes as the boy squinted at him.

The man chuckled quietly, moving to set the tray of food on the nightstand. "Yep, the untold consequences of most healing powers: the comedown and backlash."

The boy only managed a grunt in response and Phil smiled sadly. At least Tommy was still present enough to hear and understand him, he was probably just too exhausted to try talking.

He spent the next while seated on the edge of the bed, trying to coax the teen into eating something. He couldn't take his medicine on an empty stomach. Eventually, they both had to

settle for half of the fruit smoothie, which was far less than Phil was hoping for but obviously far more than Tommy wanted. Finally, he managed to make sure Tommy took the medication without choking and got to cleaning up the untouched breakfast.

Out of the corner of his eye, Phil could see Wilbur hovering anxiously in the doorway, his son's eyes glued to Tommy as the boy drifted back to sleep.

"Something's wrong Phil," Wilbur stated as they made their way back towards the lift.

Phil sighed as the doors opened and they stepped in, Wilbur pressing the button for the second floor. "Nothing's out of the ordinary mate, it's the withdrawal from all the healing powers wearing off. We've all been there, it sucks for the first few days but it gets better."

Wilbur scrubbed a hand over his face, eyes turning to the ceiling. "I know you think it's the normal withdrawal but—"

"But Tommy would be dead if it weren't for all the healing powers," Phil cut him off bluntly. "Did you read his medical file?"

"No," Wilbur admitted glumly.

"The only reason he was able to wake up so quickly was because of all the doctor's powers," Phil explained gently. "He's gonna be out of it for a while, all we can do is keep an eye on him, yeah?"

The doors slid open and Wilbur made no move to exit, so neither did Phil. They stood there, Phil watching his son and Wilbur staring at the ceiling. The doors slid closed again and they made no move to stop them. Eventually, Wilbur released a shaky breath, head tipping forward as his eyes closed. He nodded weakly.

Phil offered his son a sad smile as the younger man reached to open the door again.

"You feelin' alright mate? I know you like Tommy but this is a pretty strong reaction, even for you."

Wilbur sighed, taking the tray from Phil as they passed through the sitting room towards the kitchen. "Yeah, I've just been having a pretty shit week."

Phil frowned. "Wil, if it's the agency you know you can always ask me—"

"I'm not gonna ask you to come out of retirement just because I'm too lame to handle a stressful week, Phil. I just— I've seen more dead kids this week than I would have liked and I would rather avoid Tommy joining that list."

Phil paused to study his son. Wilbur was strong, he always had been, but hero work was never his first choice. If either of them could have had their way Wilbur would be a professional musician or a writer by now, however reality was a cruel mistress.

They had two choices after everything that happened when the boys came to live with Phil. Either Phil legally adopted them and Wilbur and Techno would attend Prime Academy to

train under government supervision, or they spend the rest of their lives in an institution to keep someone from taking advantage of their powers again. It was hardly a choice at all.

“What case is that from?”

“Manifold and I figured out that the human trafficking ring moves their victims through the nether, and the people that escape in the nether don’t make it far either way,” Wilbur answered wearily.

“Jesus Christ,” Phil sighed.

“Yeah,” Wilbur chuckled humorlessly.

Phil bit his lip. “Well like I said if it becomes too much my license isn’t expired for a couple more months. I’m always here to help if you need it.”

Wilbur rolled his eyes, sinking down into one of the stools at the counter. “While I do appreciate the offer Phil, I think I’ll be okay.”

“Alright,” Phil gave in. “And don’t worry too much about Tommy, he’s obviously a strong kid so he’ll be okay too, yeah?”

Wilbur nodded sluggishly. “Yeah, I know.” He turned to look at Phil, holding out one arm for a hug. Phil happily obliged, fitting into the younger man's arms with comfortable familiarity. “I love you, dad.”

Phil smiled against his hair and pressed a gentle kiss against his forehead. “I love you too, son.”

Chapter End Notes

Like I said, Dadza content. Maybe not that fluffy, but it compared to next weeks chapter :)

My wifi should be good by Monday, so in theory, we'll finally start regular updates. Though school starts soon for me so it might slow down a bit.

As always, leave a comment for my poor tired soul <3

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Tommy's in pain.

Wilbur's having a bad week.

Techno has a bad night.

Chapter Notes

So... in my defence, the opening scene was supposed to be the end of the last chapter, but I switched it because it was too much of a theme switch. However... this has resulted in an extra-long, extra angsty chapter... so... sorry.

TW for graphic nightmares, graphic injury, and angst.

So... yeah. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy had been injured lots of times in his life. Consequently, he had also been subject to a lot of different kinds of healing powers over the years.

In his experience, most of them had the same effect. At first, it felt great, the injuries felt mostly healed, and you could go about your day with minimal interruptions. The period it took to wear off and return to regular healing varied depending on the power. But Tommy had never experienced a recoil like this.

The day he got out of the hospital he felt great, all things considered. His injuries ached and he was tired but he was present and barely felt his concussion. By the time they got to Phil Watson's house his head had started to hurt and the injuries ached more, but he chalked that up to his pain meds wearing off and the healing effects fading.

It was now the next morning, and Tommy felt like absolute shit.

He was fairly certain Mr. Watson had tried to bring him breakfast, but he could hardly remember, with how clouded his head felt. He wasn't even sure if the man had managed to get him to take his pain medication.

This was not what coming down from healing powers was supposed to feel like.

Every breath hurt, his ribs burning like they had been rebroken and his nose swelled up as though the bone were cracked and irritated once more. His stomach felt so hot around his stab wound that he could barely even register the pain. His broken arm that was supposedly half-healed now shot lightning into his tendons any time he tried to move his fingers. Any time he tried to shift his injured leg he had to bite back a sob, as it definitely felt more broken than it had at any point in the hospital.

In all honesty, the longer Tommy laid awake the more aware he became that something was *wrong*. Yet he became less aware of what it was. Eventually, he fell into a fitful sleep.

And that's when the nightmares began.

Every time he awoke with a start, unable to remember what his dreams had been about and unable to stay awake long enough to think about it. Sometimes when he woke up he could hear voices, sometimes he was alone. Once or twice he could vaguely remember someone trying to feed him. He couldn't remember if they ever managed to get him to do so.

It was a vicious cycle that he couldn't keep track of. He'd wake with a shot of fear and adrenaline but no idea why. His whole body would scream at him, his head feeling like it was stuffed full of cotton and pounding.

Then out of nowhere the cycle broke, when one nightmare was too vivid to forget.

Tommy grunted as the bullet caught his mask, sending him flying to the ground with shattered plastic in his face. To his left he heard Tubbo scream as he hit the asphalt, clutching desperately at a sword wound across his bicep.

Tommy forced himself to look up at their assailants, squinting through the blood and pain.

The Manhunter, Dream stepped forward, gun in his hand glowing green and morphing into a wicked-looking trident. The Blade stepped around them to join his ally, Tubbo's blood still dripping from his sword's blade.

The vigilantes stumbled to their feet, swaying slightly. Around them, the scene became more visible under the light and Tommy wanted to puke. Littered across the ground around them were bodies that he knew. The bodies of the other vigilantes.

Slimesicle, crumpled at the base of a brick wall. A trail of blood smeared across the bricks above him, matching the blood smeared across what was left of his face.

Spade, collapsed in a pool of his own blood. His entire body stuck full of white-feathered arrows, so many that his form was barely visible.

HBomb, half-visible under a pile of rubble, covered in a fine layer of dust and blood.

Chiller, half a pile of ash. The only identifiable thing left of him was his support gear, the tubes and armour burnt and crumpled by the flames that had consumed his body.

From the shadows around them, more heroes appeared. The Flame Hero, Firebrand. The Nightmare Hero, Spectre. The Seer, Vulpine. The Lucky Hero, Ace. Scarlet Thorn. The

Captain. Refractz. Permafrost. Every hero Theseus had ever faced in combat, stepping over the bodies of his fallen comrades to form a circle around him and Haywire. Cutting off any chance of escape.

From above them came an unfamiliar sound of a war cry from a familiar voice. Crumb and Ranboo dropped from the sky, the cat hybrid with a mighty shout.

The small vigilante landed with grace, racing to the nearest hero to release a brutal series of slashes and attacks. She landed a single blow on Permafrost before the larger feline-hybrid returned the slash with ten times the strength. Crumb's decorative ceramic mask shattered, revealing her face mask underneath and a wide look of fear as the hero closed in for the kill. His claws sunk into the young vigilante's throat before she even had a chance to scream. He dropped her to the floor, wet gurgling escaping her as blood gushed from her neck.

Ranboo landed heavily and rushed Dream with an inhuman screeching noise. The hero drew back his trident for a throw and Ranboo vanished in a flash of purple, reappearing behind his target. Without a moment's hesitation Dream dropped the trident, whipping around and crouching to grab it mid-air. In one fluid motion, he jabbed the spear-like end of the trident through Ranboo's stomach and up through his chest. Ranboo's body went completely limp. A pathetic ender-like chirp escaped him as Dream pulled the weapon out, kicking the vigilante's body to the side like it was nothing but an inconvenience.

Beside Theseus, Haywire screamed.

Across from them, Dream laughed.

"Vigilantes are a scourge on our society," came the familiar words from Dream. Word he had spoken in interviews more times than Tommy could remember. His free hand slowly reached up behind him, pushing back his hood to reveal dirty blond hair. "This is the fate that awaits you all," he monologued, hand moving to the band that kept the mask on his face. "Whether it's at our hands," he gestured with the trident to the heroes surrounding them, "or theirs."

The mask fell away from his face, revealing a dried-out skull, dust falling down it in small rivers as the remaining skin and hair crumbled to nothing. All around them the heroes removed their masks, revealing empty skulls as their hair and hands dissipated into ashes. Tommy watched in horror as his friend's bodies began to do the same, despite already being dead.

Above them, thunder boomed and the sky opened up, pouring down sheets of water and lightning. Every skeleton Tommy could see began to melt, just like they had that night in the shipping yard. Thunder boomed again and all the dead heroes collapsed. Lightning flash and Laura Blackwell appeared, ten feet away and aiming a small handgun at him.

"Tommy!" Tubbo screamed over the storm. Tommy whirled around to find his best friend lunging for him. Tubbo's hands gripped his biceps like vices as the protective helmet cracked and fell away from his face. Tommy was forced to watch in horror as Tubbo too, began to crumble to bones and dust. He tried to push his friend away, tears streaming down his face as Tubbo only gripped tighter. The rain mixed with the dust to create small rivers of grey ash that poured over the revealing skull.

Tommy sobbed, pushing harder against his friend's body. This time it gave far too easily, the hands around his bicep falling away with a clattering sound of bones striking concrete. The rest of Tubbos' remains followed, landing on the ground with a wet thunk and more clattering.

The teen looked back up at Laura, who now had her finger on the trigger. "It's nothing personal Thomas!" she shouted over the rain and thunder. "It's just-"

"-ommy! Tommy, I need you to breathe!"

Wilbur had already been having a pretty shit month before he met Tommy.

Now that wasn't to say that Tommy was the direct cause of more shit in his life, but the boy was definitely a new source of worry that he didn't need.

The month had started out with the hero commission assigning him a new underground investigation. Wilbur was never that fond of being a hero in the first place, but he found contentment in the fact that he was saving people's lives. It was easier for him to be at peace with his work when he was just stopping muggings and saving old ladies from getting run over, it was much harder when he had to spend a week undercover in a human trafficking ring.

Wilbur's assignment was to track their movements and report them back to the commission. He was under no circumstances to risk his cover or interfere with the operation without direct orders to do so. It was awful, to say the least.

Every instinct in his body told him to get the victims out, to save them. He couldn't though, so all he wanted to do was shy away, to run so he didn't feel the guilt. It made acting like a cold-hearted villain really hard.

But eventually, he had enough information for other heroes to get called in. When they finally took out the ring leaders Wilbur relished each hit that was a little too hard a little too much. It gave him an outlet for his frustration at the situation but did little to ease the guilt of having to let so many victims pass him by.

Then he got a nice break to patrol with Niki, where they found a half-dead teenager outside her bakery.

He then had to spend the next week going back and forth between the human trafficking case and Tommy's, neither of which were particularly nice to work on. Between having to identify victims from missing persons and coroner's reports, and getting absolutely nowhere in the assault victim case he was slowly starting to reach his limit.

But then they had a breakthrough in both cases. Jack Manifold, aka Thunderstrike, managed to find the trafficking rings route through the nether, and Tommy woke up, giving up the Blackwell's and setting them onto the mysterious men in suits. Wilbur felt like the rough patch from the previous two weeks was finally on its way out.

He decided that what he really needed to unwind was to spend some time at his dad's, so he packed his bags and locked up his apartment. Only when he arrived there was some gangly foster kid with a broken arm in the driveway. He shared his McDonald's fries and had a lovely conversation with the kid, discovering that the social worker was dropping off a different boy. When he got inside, apparently there Tommy was, yet again.

After that things continued to go downhill.

Despite Phil's hope that Tommy's state was just the result of healing powers wearing off, it seemed like the boy's condition was actually deteriorating. For the first three days, he was in and out of consciousness, staying awake and aware just long enough for someone to force some food and medication into him.

It was unnerving, but after taking a look at the medical file for himself Wilbur could agree that it wasn't an abnormal reaction to coming down from the healing powers. Especially for a civilian with barely any history of such severe traumatic injuries.

On the fourth day, Tommy's eyes would open, but it was clear that he wasn't mentally present. Multiple times both Phil and Wilbur tried to get his attention long enough to show him the food they had, so far it had been enough to rouse the boy for a few minutes, but not this time. He made no signs that he recognized that they were even there, simply waking with a sharp flinch at random intervals and nodding off seconds later. Finally, Phil was forced to cave and call the doctors.

While the doctors did agree that it appeared concerning all they told Phil to do was monitor the teen for a bit longer. They said that if they were unable to get him to eat within a few days or if his condition worsened significantly, they would get him back in the hospital.

On the night of the fifth day, or early morning of the sixth, Wilbur awoke to the sound of screaming.

He bolted up in bed, chest tight with panic. Gritting his teeth he forced himself to breathe and think as he sprinted into the hall.

Wilbur was the only one in the house tonight. Techno, who had been staying at his own apartment more recently, would be on patrol around now. Meanwhile, Phil got called into the agency for a management meeting. He made sure to grab his phone on the way out.

In less than thirty seconds he was at Tommy's door, listening for the shouting again but only hearing a strangled noise.

Wilbur's knuckles ached from clenching his fist as he banged on the door. "Tommy!" he shouted. After no sign of a response, he shoved his way inside.

Inside Tommy was writhing on the bed, gasping for air while tears streamed down his face. Wilbur rushed to his side, shoving down his own discomfort in order to assess the situation.

He sat on the edge of the bed, trying his best to shake the boy awake while being gentle on his injuries. When that failed he started checking for signs of what could be wrong. A quick

check on his temperature and pulse told Wilbur what he needed to know.

He was most likely having a fever-induced nightmare.

With that in mind, he knew that it was probably best if he tried a little harder to wake him. If only to stop the boy from writhing and making his injuries worse.

“Tommy,” he said firmly, planting his hands on the kid's shoulders. “Tommy, it's just a dream, you're alright. Tommy, you need to wake up, you're having a-”

Tommy suddenly screamed, body writhing in his grasp as he cut Wilbur off. Wilbur grit his teeth, making sure his grip wasn't too tight as he tried to force the teen to still.

“Tommy, you're having a nightmare. It isn't *real*. Just-”

The boy sobbed, arms flying up with enough strength to shake off Wilbur's grip. The man dodged to the side as the hands lashed out before coming up to protect the boy's face. Tommy sobbed again and Wilbur's eyes stung.

Any other week he could handle this. He had the training, he had the practice. Wilbur Soot-Watson was a pro hero and had been trained for situations like this since he was in high school. But it just so happened to be *that* week. Wilbur already felt like shit and had proven that he was in quite the state earlier that day when he teared up at a dawn dish soap commercial where they were saving oil-covered seagulls.

So as it was Wilbur was panicking. His lungs hurt and his eyes stung and he couldn't mask the fear and concern in his voice as he tried over and over to wake the boy. Every second that Tommy continued to shake and cry out in his feverish sleep Wilbur's mind supplied him with an ever-growing list of concerns.

What if his injuries were worse than they thought? What if his concussion and fever were causing permanent brain damage? What if Wilbur sat here too long and the boy's state worsened while he sat idly by? What if? What if?

Eventually, a small voice of reason broke through the fog and made Wilbur fumble for his phone. Since he obviously wasn't in any state to be handling this he should probably text someone that was.

He opened their family group chat.

Wibly Scoot: *Something is very wrong with tommy amd im not in a state to handle it*

Technoblade: *On a scale from one to Techno come home right now, how bad is it?*

The bed beneath Wilbur jolted and he looked up from his phone to see Tommy's arms slam into the bed underneath him as though he were catching himself from a fall. The teen's head snapped to the side and his lips pulled back to reveal a pained grimace. Tommy's hands tightened into fists full of sheets and Wilbur's stomach did flips upon noticing red soaking through a bandage on his bicep.

***Wibly Scoot:** Please come home I can't do this right now*

He typed out with shaking hands.

***Technoblade:** Be there in ten, just hang in there*

Next to him, Tommy cried out again, causing Wilbur to fumble and drop his phone. The device hit the hardwood floor with a crash and Tommy sobbed. Wilbur managed a shaking breath before redoubling on his efforts to break the kid out of his nightmare.

"Tommy!" He nearly shouted, replacing his hands on the teen's shoulders and shaking him as hard as he dared. Tommy's only reply was a choking noise and more thrashing.

Wilbur resisted the urge to sob himself. Only days before a girl Tommy's age had died in his arms like this, thrashing and unaware due to an overdose of an unknown drug her captors pumped her full of. The last thing he wanted right now was another dead kid in his arms. Especially not a dead kid that he had spoken to enough to vaguely get to know him, to like him. Especially not Tommy.

"Tommy!" he tried again. "Tommy, I need you to breathe! You're just going to make your injuries worse if you don't try to calm down!"

To Wilbur's surprise, the teen gasped, eyes blinking against the dim light and body rolling onto his side while a coughing fit wracked his frame. Even as Tommy's eyes squeezed shut again Wilbur barely managed to suppress a relieved sob.

His hand moved to the boy's hair on instinct. "Hey man, hey. You're okay, it was just a bad dream, yeah?" Wilbur spoke in an imitation of a comforting voice, attempting to soothe the boy as he caught his breath.

Wilbur's heart ached at the pitiful grunt of pain the boy made as he rolled back onto his back, but he didn't stop his stream of words. "You're gonna be just fine," he said, running his fingers back through the damp blond tangles. "It was a bad dream, nobody's going to hurt you." The boy took in a ragged breath and Wilbur let out a shaky sigh. "I know everything hurts right now, but don't worry we're gonna call the doctors again tomorrow and make them figure out what's wrong."

As he spoke he watched Tommy's eyes crack open again, blue irises catching the dim hall light in a way that reminded Wilbur of Phil when he used to wake the man in the middle of the night. Wilbur smiled at the thought. "I know it's scary right now, and that you don't really know me. But I kind of know you, and I know that you're strong enough to get through this. Okay, Toms?" He didn't stop carding his fingers through the boy's hair even as his eyes slid shut again. "Everything's gonna be fine, I promise."

He kept talking as he watched Tommy slowly relax, his ragged breathing evening out into weak puffs of air. His tense frame sank back into the sheets and some of the tension was released from his expression. It wasn't perfect, but it was leagues better than how the boy had looked when Wilbur entered the room.

Eventually, his words died out, but he didn't move from his place on the edge of the bed. He didn't stop petting Tommy's hair either. Wilbur could feel his own weariness beginning to set in the longer they sat in silence.

Wilbur heard the swift footsteps on the stairs before he heard Techno's voice.

"Wilbur?" he called out. "Everything alright?"

"In here!" Wilbur replied as loud as he dared, hand finally stilling on Tommy's head. He grimaced at the hoarseness of his own voice.

Techno was up the stairs and in the doorway in the blink of an eye. "You sound like shit," his brother said bluntly, hovering awkwardly in the doorway.

Wilbur raised his head to look at Techno, only to be taken aback by his ragged appearance. His hair was thrown up in a rat's nest of a bun and he was dressed in his hero uniform's white compression undershirt and black cargo pants. His left bicep was hastily wrapped in a bloody bandage and he sported darkening bruises on his jaw and knuckles.

"Jesus, you look like shit," he shot back. "What the hell happened?"

Techno raised an eyebrow, glancing briefly at Tommy's sleeping form and back at Wilbur. "You said it was an emergency," was all the explanation he gave. The corners of his mouth turned down slightly, "I'm not sure that a single set of pulled stitches qualifies as an emergency though."

Wilbur looked back down at Tommy's bandaged arms and shook his head. "That's not— he was having a night terror and I couldn't wake him up. I— I was panicking. It hasn't exactly been my week when it comes to injured kids."

He could practically hear Techno's frown as the other man moved into the room, gently nudging Wilbur aside to check on Tommy himself. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Wilbur sighed deeply, sliding down the edge of the bed to sit on the floor. Techno moved to fill his space as he continued to check the teen's injuries. "That mean's that I got put on a human trafficking case three weeks ago and have had four teenagers die in my arms since then."

That got his brother's attention. Techno looked up from his work, fixing him with a look of concern. Wilbur shrugged, turning to study the dying palm plant in the corner. After a moment he heard the shuffling return as Techno began to check all Tommy's bandages.

Most other people would have pressed Wilbur to talk about it, but not his brother. He and Techno had known each other longer than anyone else in their lives excluding Phil. Their father would always worry about them, push them to talk if they felt the need. It was different with the brothers. If one of them needed to talk about something, they would. They both knew it and that was enough.

"Can you go get the first aid kit for me?" Techno asked eventually.

Wilbur hummed a wordless agreement, slowly pushing himself up from the cold floor. He took one last glance at Tommy and Techno, noting both their injuries. He decided it was probably worth going to the kitchen to retrieve the big kit, even just based on the amount of bandages they were going to need.

When he returned with the large tote full of medical supplies Techno got to work in silence. The air was tense despite Tommy being unconscious and Wilbur being too exhausted to really worry anymore. He refrained from commenting until Techno messed up a bandage and started cursing under his breath.

"Everything alright there? You seem a bit... tense," Wilbur settled on.

Techno sighed, rewrapping the bandage slower this time. "I haven't exactly had the best week with injured teenagers myself," he admitted quietly.

This in turn caught Wilbur's attention. Unlike Wilbur, Techno was born and bred for the hero and villain game. He was countless generations into it and just so happened to be raised by the good guys for a change. So him admitting to having any kind of trouble or turmoil when it came to his hero work was unusual. Usually, it was Wilbur's place to angst and Phil's place to brood. Techno, more often than not, just settled somewhere near content.

Wilbur hesitated before speaking. "Do you... want to talk about it?"

Techno briefly glanced in his direction before returning his attention to Tommy. "Theseus is dead," he said after a moment.

Oh. Well, that explained it. If there was one thing that got Techno anything close to worked up it was the vigilante kids that were always trying to get themselves killed. Many had come and gone over the years, but Theseus was the only one that managed to evade capture and still refused to quit once The Blade was on his case.

"Oh. Shit," was all Wilbur could come up with.

Theseus was a well-known and respected vigilante, though few ever considered the fact that he very well may have been a teenager. It was hard to imagine what could have happened to him. As far as vigilantes went he was one of the most careful that Wilbur had ever heard of.

“He got caught in the middle of a gang war ambush,” Techno explained. “Under normal circumstances, I would have bet he could just call EndWalker for an extraction, but I ran into him earlier that night.”

Wilbur frowned. “How would that affect his ability to call for backup?”

“I told Scarlet Thorn to break his communicator when he reached for it,” Techno said bluntly. “She did, but he still got away. I guess he went to finish his patrol without it.”

Oh. Oh no. Either Wilbur was severely misreading his brother, which seemed unlikely, or Techno was way more attached to the kid than Wilbur thought.

“You know it's not your fault, right?” Wilbur asked. When he was met with stubborn silence he asked again, “*Right*, Techno?”

“Doesn’t matter whose fault it is,” Techno replied flatly, “kid's still dead.” He finished dressing the last of Tommy's wounds, throwing out the old bandages and wrappers before moving to exit the room.

Wilbur caught him by the arm and his brother turned to fix him with a glare. Wilbur returned the look with just as much force. “Let me look at your injuries first,” he demanded in a tone that left no room for argument.

Techno glared for a moment longer before rolling his eyes. Wilbur smirked victoriously as they cleaned up the first aid kit and made their way to the hall bathroom for better light.

Wilbur waited until he was halfway through the stitches on Techno’s arm before bringing it back up. “It’s still not your fault you know. You couldn't catch him, he wouldn’t give up. It was bound to end this way eventually.”

Techno glared at him, no doubt realizing that because Wilbur was only partway through the stitches that he couldn’t storm off. He turned his glare on the shower door across from him. “I should’a been able to catch him, it’s literally my job.”

“Your *job* is to protect civilian lives and be flashy while doing it. He made it pretty obvious that he wasn’t just any civilian and he wasn’t a danger to actual civilian lives. I’d say you did your *job* just fine.”

Techno growled, “But he *was* a civilian,” he argued. “If I couldn’t catch him I should’ve at least been able to—”

“He was a *vigilante*,” Wilbur corrected, finishing another stitch. “I know you liked him, and I’m sure he was a great kid. You’re allowed to mourn him but you can’t blame yourself. He’s not like the rest of the kids that tried out the mask, he did this for *years*. After all this time he had to know the risk.”

“I didn’t *like* him,” Techno huffed. “He never even spoke to me.”

“Then why do you care?” Wilbur pressed.

Techno glared at the wall in silence while Wilbur finished his stitches. He didn't speak until Wilbur was wrapping the injury in fresh gauze.

"Fundy and Niki wanted me to tell you that they're having sad drinks with Manifold, Eret and Puffy at Niki's after patrol. Niki said I had to make sure you were there."

Wilbur sighed. The fact that Techno suddenly changed the subject was not lost on him, but he decided to just go with it. "I think I'd rather—"

"Go drink with your friends?" Techno interrupted. "That sounds like a good idea Wilbur, I'm so glad you feel like getting out instead of torturing yourself with a sick kid that almost gave you an anxiety attack."

Wilbur took a breath, ready to argue before he caught Techno's unimpressed look. He huffed in defeat and chuckled lightly. "Why is it sad drinks?"

"How should I know? Ask 'em yourself," Techno shrugged, tugging off his undershirt and making his way out into the hall. "I can handle looking after the kid for a bit, so just get out of here."

"You promise to call me if anything goes wrong with him?" Wilbur asked suspiciously.

"Yeah, yeah. Just get out of here nerd," Techno waved him off.

Wilbur couldn't help but smile. "You're a good man Techie," he teased.

Techno groaned. "Just go."

Techno and Wilbur traded light banter as the former cleaned up after his hasty patrol exit and the latter got ready to go for drinks. Techno checked on Tommy one last time before he headed downstairs to his room. The kid was out cold and seemed to be breathing steadily enough that he wasn't too worried about leaving him for fifteen minutes.

He had just stepped in the shower, mindful of his newly dressed arm injury, when Wilbur called out a goodbye on his way down to the garage.

"Don't be afraid to stay over if you drink too much!" Techno shouted. "And don't get too worked up about the foster kid she's watching either! It's bad for your blood pressure!" he teased.

Wilbur's muffled laughter managed to reach his ears over the sound of rushing water. "Thanks, mom! Promise I'll make good choices!" he sing-songed before the sound of his footsteps grew too distant to hear.

Techno rolled his eyes and snorted, going back to finish his business as quickly as someone with over two feet of hair could.

Once he was finished Techno tossed on a loose t-shirt and gym shorts, hastily twisting his wet hair into a bun as he jogged up to the fourth floor again. While he knew that a lot of it was Wilbur's anxiety making him overreact, he couldn't put aside the fact that Tommy still looked like shit. It was worth checking on him a few more times to make sure he didn't suddenly crash before declaring his condition clear.

Techno did have to admit that he was a little out of his depth in this exact situation. While he knew that Phil had taken in an emergency foster named Tommy and that the kid was recovering from injuries, that was about it. He had no idea what the injuries were from or why the kid had to stay with Tempest of all people.

It had become less of a mystery as he saw the nature of the teen's wounds though. Most of them were stitched up blade slices and bullet grazes, so it wouldn't be a stretch to assume the kid was in a similar situation to what Wilbur or Techno had gone through as kids. The only question he really had now was if he was more like himself or Wilbur. Was he a baby assassin or just an unlucky kid?

He arrived at his destination, pushing the door open a crack intending to just glance inside. He froze at what he found.

Apparently, the kid couldn't be left alone for fifteen minutes, because he was gone.

Before Techno even had the chance to imagine Wilbur and Phil killing him for letting the kid slip away he heard a noise in the bathroom. He turned back to see that the bathroom door was open a crack, letting the sound of wet coughing and grunts of pain escape into the hall.

Techno frowned. He had thought that Tommy would be completely unconscious until they found a way to heal some of his injuries more, but apparently, he wasn't so injured that he couldn't move.

He crept towards the bathroom, making sure his footsteps could be heard, and pushed the door open slowly. Techno clenched his jaw at what he found inside.

Tommy was propped up against the corner across from the toilet, wheezing as he attempted to wrap a fresh bandage around his now bloody stomach.

The teen took another rattling breath which only served to launch him into another coughing fit, undoing all the work of the fresh bandage as the stitches tore further. The boy cursed, giving up his weak attempts at treating the injury in favour of tipping his head back against the wall, eyes closed.

Techno grimaced. The bathroom was a mess, the first aid kit having been torn open and rummaged through violently. There were small droplets of blood staining the carpet and grey tiles and a small pool of it slowly collecting on the floor beneath the boy. Worst of all he could see blood starting to soak through the new dressings Techno had done not even half an hour before. Something was very wrong.

He pushed away the mental images of the last time this bathroom had been covered in blood, not keen on having a repeat of that experience.

Frowning, Techno knocked lightly on the door, moving to push it open further before he saw the way the boy froze.

Tommy's eyes shot open, weakly focused on Techno's form as every muscle in his body tensed, even his wheezing breaths vanished. Techno didn't dare move, knowing that scaring the boy would only make things worse for everyone involved.

"I'm sorry," Tommy managed to choke out eventually. "I'll- I'll clean up a-after. I was trying not to ge-get blood on anything but I just-" he was cut off by another coughing fit wracking his body, head ducking down so Techno could no longer see his face.

Techno's eyes widened behind his glasses as he saw flecks of blood spattering the shower door and light grey carpet. "Fu-fuck," the boy wheezed, hand coming up to wipe the blood from his lips. It proved to be pointless when a moment later his nose started to sluggishly bleed.

It took all of Techno's self-control and training to stop himself from immediately rushing to Tommy's side. He pushed the door the rest of the way open slowly. "Tommy," he started, only for the boy to interrupt him.

" 'm sorry," he slurred, "I just didn't wanna bo... bother you..."

"It's okay Tommy, I'm not mad. But I'm going to come over there now, okay?" he tried again. "You're really hurt and I just want to make sure you're okay, yeah?"

Tommy studied Techno through half-lidded eyes, hand dropping from his face as he gave up his futile attempts to staunch his bloody nose.

Just as Techno was about to decide saving the kid was more important than not scaring him, Tommy wheezed out a quiet " 'Kay," eyes closing again as he leaned back against the wall.

Techno took the invitation and moved to his side as quickly as he dared. As he crouched at Tommy's side he froze for a moment, watching in shock as small cuts that weren't there before began to open up all over the teen's face, bleeding sluggishly.

Techno started. Tommy's injuries were actively *unhealing* themselves.

"Fuck," he muttered under his breath, earning him a wheeze that sounded suspiciously like a small laugh. "I'm gonna touch you now, okay kid?"

"Not..." he took a rattling breath, "a kid."

Techno rolled his eyes, "Uh-huh."

He reached over, lifting up Tommy's blood-soaked shirt to investigate the most pressing injury: his *unhealing stab wound*. The half-wrapped bandage had reached its absorption limit, meaning small rivers of red trailed down the kid's side at an alarming rate, pooling in the junction of his waist before continuing down to the growing pool on the floor.

Tommy coughed again and Techno ignored the hot flecks of blood that covered him. He lifted a hand to Tommy's neck, ignoring how the kid flinched at the sudden contact. Tommy's pulse was noticeably weak and fluttering. There wasn't much Techno could do, he needed a real doctor.

"Ok Tommy, I think we should lay you on your back. It'll be easier for me to slow the bleeding from your stomach that way. You think we can do that?"

The teen grunted but made no attempt at a verbal reply. If his injuries were unhealing, all Techno could pray for was that the kid's original head injury wasn't too severe.

He moved so that one arm was around Tommy's back and the other hand at the base of his skull to support his head. Using as much strength as possible he gently turned them so that Tommy's head was facing the door and that they were far enough from the wall for his legs to straighten comfortably.

Techno grimaced as he felt something hot and sticky on the hand supporting his head. When he finally got the boy situated and pulled away he grimaced. There was another new injury on Tommy's temple, soaking blood into his hair and subsequently down onto Techno's palm as he had moved him. So much for no severe head injuries.

Techno resisted the urge to growl as he moved to put pressure on the stab wound. If these had been fresh wounds, straight out of a fight while Tommy still had adrenaline in his system it wouldn't be so dire. But they weren't fresh. Tommy was weak and tired, right out of a week's worth of bed rest with barely enough food to stay alive. He had no energy and his body wasn't in survival mode. These injuries in his current condition would only cause his body to start shutting down.

The average ambulance response time to their townhouse would be between fifteen and twenty minutes. Then another fifteen to twenty to get Tommy to a hospital, where they had originally treated him in such a way that his injuries didn't stay healed anyway.

He doubted Tommy had much longer than half an hour, maximum before he was dead.

What other options did he have?

Puffy was at Niki's, but they were drinking. Even if she could drive it would be about twenty minutes before she could help either. But they were out of options and out of time. Either Puffy could help or she couldn't.

He shuffled, using one hand to put pressure on the bunched-up bandages and the other to search for his phone. Ignoring the way blood smeared across the screen as he searched for her personal contact.

Under his hand, he could feel Tommy's breathing getting weaker.

She picked up on the third ring. "*Hello?*"

“Puffy, don’t let Wilbur know it's me. I need you to get to Phil’s as fast as you can *right now*.”

“*What— Te— What’s going on?*”

Techno grimaced, “Phil’s foster kid is dyin’,” he said. “His injuries are unhealing themselves and he doesn’t have any adrenaline or energy to keep him going. *Please* tell me there’s someone that can still drive.”

“*I— shit. I can’t but I’ll ask Niki. How long do you think he can last?*”

Techno looked up at Tommy's face, more bruises and cuts had appeared standing out starkly against his pale and clammy skin. His breathing had gone from rattling wheezes to small, quick puffs of air.

“I wouldn’t give it much longer than twenty minutes if we’re lucky,” Techno replied grimly.

“*Fuck,*” Puffy spat on the other side of the line. “*Okay, hang in there I’ll figure something out.*”

“Wasn’t plannin’ on doing anything else,” Techno grumbled as the line went dead.

He sat in silence after that, choosing to focus more on Tommy than the time. He listened as the boy's breathing got slower, but not stronger. Every few seconds he would gasp quietly, taking in another small breath before huffing it back out. The time between each breath became more and more anxiety-inducing as Techno wondered which one would be his last.

He couldn’t help but study all the wounds with a grim fascination as their conditions deteriorated. Blood began to soak all his bandaged injuries so thoroughly that they started dripping more crimson onto the tile floor. The dark bruises on his face reversed their course until they were bright and swollen, not yet bruises. His skin lost more colour by the second until he was so pale one could mistake him for a corpse. The only thing making him different was the slow gasps for air as he clung to life.

Techno listened intently to Tommy's breathing. Counting the seconds between the sounds of him breathing in and out. *One, two, three, in. One, two, three, four, out. One, two, three, four, in. One, two, three, out. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven...*

Tommy wasn’t breathing.

Techno abandoned the stab wound, lunging towards Tommy's chest. He pressed a bloody hand to the teen's neck, searching for a pulse. When he failed to find one after a few seconds he started chest compressions. His phone vibrated with a text, he glanced at the glowing screen ignoring the text in favour of checking the time. It had only been ten minutes since Puffy hung up. She wasn’t going to make it.

Techno grit his teeth, turning his full attention back on the boy beneath his hands. Even if she was too late he couldn’t stop. He had heard of people coming back from injuries like this, usually by a miracle. But if he could somehow keep Tommy anywhere near alive, maybe

Puffy could save him. She was *The Captain*. If anybody had a healing power strong enough to save Tommy's life, it was her.

All Techno could do was keep trying.

Chapter End Notes

Hahaha...ha...ha. Yeah, here we go.

Anyway, I got internet now so yay. I also planned out the rest of the scenes and plot points and we still have a ton to get through so this is going to be quite the monster of a fic. I'm up to just over 40k in the draft and it's still barely made a dent in the outline.

I've also been doing a lot of art and designs from this fic which I might post to Twitter and TikTok if anyone were interested. Let me know in the comments when you're done screaming at me :)

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Tommy dies. Kind of.

Chapter Notes

Sorry not sorry for the cliffhanger. I promise it gets slightly worse before it gets better, they'll catch a bit of a break soon.

CW: severe injuries, vomit, suicidal ideation, panic attacks

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

This wasn't how Tommy pictured dying, but there was no avoiding it now. He had his fair share of close calls in his life, but very few of them felt as undeniable as this one.

There was the first time a foster parent got so drunk that he beat Tommy unconscious. He was surprised when he woke up in the hospital. At a ripe old seven years old he had laid on the kitchen floor so sure that he wouldn't wake up if he passed out, but he did.

There was the first time he ever got stabbed, but he got out of that one alright as it was the night he met Tubbo, who knew a thing or two about stitching injuries.

There was that time The Blade kicked him off of a ten-story building, but Ranboo had appeared just in the nick of time, teleporting them back to the safety of the ground five blocks away. That was the first time any of his vigilante allies saw him have a panic attack, but he didn't die.

Then there was *The Very Bad Night*. He had been so *sure* that it was going to be his last night on earth a number of times, but he kept getting lucky. The Blade barely even chased him, the bullets didn't kill him, the villain's powers didn't work on him and the men in suits were too busy fighting his foster parents to actually finish it. It was a genuine surprise to wake up alive after passing out in an alley, but a pleasant one.

Apparently, it had been too good to be true, because all those injuries that had supposedly healed were the thing currently killing him. He was going to bleed out on the bathroom floor of some rich guy's house while his son, who looked like The Blade if he became a librarian, tried and failed to call for help.

The worst part, in Tommy's humble opinion, was that this wasn't a good end to his story. There was no glory in this, nobody that cared about him would ever know. He didn't go out saving someone, he was going to die just because of one stupid mistake. If he had just remembered to grab another communicator, he wouldn't be here dying in some stranger's house.

In a few weeks when nobody had heard from him, Tubbo would look into it and find Tommy's death certificate. He and the rest of their friends wouldn't know what happened until Ranboo healed enough to return as EndWalker, but would only be able to give them half the story.

Something snapped in Tommy as he realized this, because suddenly he couldn't even find it in himself to care.

Sure he felt guilty that his friends would miss him, that they wouldn't know for a while, but he was *tired*.

Tommy was so fucking tired of all of it. He was tired of the beatings, of hiding injuries, of balancing random part-time jobs and online school, of being kicked out of every place he was dropped in, tired of the nightmares, tired of the random panic attacks, of having no one that truly cared about him, no *family*.

He was tired of the cycle his life had become. Near-death experience, recover and return to a shitty life, repeat. Over and over for as long as he could remember that was all his life had ever really been, wasn't it?

Yes, Tubbo and Ranboo would miss him, but how good of friends were they really? Tommy didn't know Ranboo was a foster kid for years, he still didn't even know Tubbo's last name. Casual work friends weren't enough to keep someone going, weren't enough to live for when you had no one that loved you.

They'd get over it, this was an occupational hazard after all. They all got over it when Connor died, they'd get over Tommy too.

So Tommy stopped fighting it. Not that he had much of the ability to before. He relaxed back into the cold, hard tile and let the sound of the pink-haired guy on the phone wash over him, no longer straining to comprehend the words.

He focused on the feeling of numbness that had begun to spread over his body, like he was slowly floating down a river that washed it all away. He focused on the relief he felt as the pain no longer registered in his damaged brain. He felt the encompassing warmth as spread from his major injuries, chasing away the cold clawing at his limbs. The room was silent around him as a comfortable sensation like a soft blanket of static settled into his bones and mind.

He wouldn't miss living, what good had it ever really done him anyway? In all honesty, it was amazing that he hadn't given up on it earlier, after all the shit he'd been through. How many times could someone wake up in the hospital and start a new life that only lasted a few months before they stopped wanting to wake up? How many times could a vigilante fail to

save someone, watch another human die because they weren't fast enough, before they realized it was all pointless?

If he still had any control over his body he would have smiled at the prospect of finally getting to rest.

Despite his fading ability to register sensations, he could almost feel the soft, cold hand carding through his hair.

Then someone came in and interrupted his death by taking his broken pain dial and turning it up to eleven.

A guttural scream tore itself from his throat as suddenly every injury on his body felt like it was on fire. He sat bolt upright, limbs thrashing violently for a moment before arms closed around him, pinning him in place.

He couldn't see, couldn't process what was happening. All Tommy knew was that everything *hurt*, worse than anything he'd felt in his entire life. There was no way it wasn't the doing of someone's powers, so he activated his own in a vain attempt to *make it stop*. He felt his powers latch onto something but it did nothing to stop the pain as he struggled to breathe between strangled gasps and cries. Whoever power this was wasn't the one touching him, so he let his own power slip.

After what felt like a lifetime, the pain began to fade and Tommy was able to pry his eyes open and see his surroundings. He was still on the bathroom floor, the pink-haired guy holding him upright as his energy began to flag once more. The arms loosened just as he registered the feeling of serious nausea stirring in his head and stomach as the pain faded. He broke free of the man's arms and lunged for the toilet just in time.

Tommy clutched at his gut as it purged what little contents it held. Eventually when there was nothing left to give and the nausea suddenly faded. He leaned back, disturbed to find that the contents of the porcelain bowl were mostly red and dark. He swallowed down the taste of iron and acid and he reached for the handle, flushing it away.

The teen slumped back against the wall behind him, sluggishly turning his head to examine the other occupants of the bathroom. He blinked in surprise as he saw Puffy the diner owner, who he once worked for, crouched on the floor next to the pink-haired guy. Hovering nervously in the doorway was Ranboo of all people.

He coughed weakly, eyes straying back to Puffy. "You have the most fucked up healing power I have ever experienced," he rasped, grimacing at how rough his own voice sounded.

Everyone else in the room immediately relaxed. The pink-haired guy's shoulders dropped as the tension left his body. Ranboo groaned, leaning against the doorway and sinking to the floor.

Puffy sighed in relief. "Usually people thank me after I save their lives," she laughed.

Tommy frowned, shifting slowly so that he was facing them. “You do that a lot? I thought you owned a diner.”

“The diner’s more of a, ah, retirement hobby I guess,” she replied. “But seriously, it felt like I was trying to wrestle a grizzly bear trying to get the healing to stick. I didn’t think you were coming back for a minute there.”

“Maybe I didn’t want to,” Tommy muttered without thinking about it.

In his exhausted state Tommy didn’t realize that was probably the wrong thing to say until Ranboo’s head shot up. “Tommy please tell me that was a joke, that better have been a joke.”

“It was a joke,” he lied immediately. “Sorry, guess it’s not that funny.”

Ranboo sighed, though he sounded more tired than relieved. “Tommy, man, you can’t keep doing this.”

Tommy closed his eyes and nodded, “Believe me Ranboo, I’m done. I’m never doing that again.” If Tommy could avoid getting into any more near-death experiences for the rest of his life, he could probably die happy-ish. Though honestly, he would’ve been happy to die just now if Puffy weren’t there.

He opened his eyes and found Ranboo searching his face for something. His friend frowned. “You serious?”

Tommy forced a small shit-eating grin onto his face, “Dead,” he replied with a snort.

Ranboo scoffed and rolled his eyes while Puffy gasped.

“Tommy!” she scolded. “It’s not funny! You scared the shit out of us man!”

“It’s a little funny,” he argued. He sighed, “What are you two even doing here? How do you even know each other?” It was obvious enough that Ranboo had been the one to get her there in time to save Tommy, but that didn’t explain why they were together or how the pink-haired guy got ahold of them.

“I’m also curious,” pink-haired guy agreed.

“I was having drinks and Niki’s and she’s been fostering Ranboo,” Puffy explained. “We knew he had a teleporting power and didn’t really have any options other than asking if he had a way to get me here. Luckily enough he’d been here before. Though, I didn’t know that, or that you two know each other,” she said, looking at Ranboo with a curious expression.

“We met at the same jujitsu gym a few years ago,” Ranboo told them. It wasn’t exactly a lie, they met in passing a few times but took different level classes, and not for very long.

The pink-haired guy hummed. “Well, looks like luck was on your side,” he told Tommy. “Though I bet you probably want to take a shower now, huh?”

Tommy wrinkled his nose realizing for the first time that the man was probably right. While Puffy's powers had completely healed all his injuries, the blood and grime still remained. He felt absolutely disgusting between the dried sweat in his hair and clothes from his fever and the tacky drying blood on all his bandages, clothes, hair and face.

"That sounds lovely, but I'm pretty sure this was my last wearable shirt," he grumbled.

The pink-haired man pushed to his feet, offering Tommy a hand. "I'm sure we can find something that'll work."

Tommy swatted the hand away, struggling to stand with the support of the wall. "Whatever," he grunted. When he finally managed to stand, a wall supporting most of his weight, he couldn't help but grimace at the sight the bathroom had become. "Sorry about your bathroom, I'll clean it up later."

The man raised a brow, looking unimpressed. Maybe Tommy shouldn't have tacked 'later' onto the end there. "It's fine," he said, monotone.

God Tommy hated staying with rich people, they never said what they meant. Did the guy expect him to clean it later then? Or was he saying Tommy didn't have to do it?

Why the hell did they have to save him? Everyone would have been better off without him interrupting their drinks and messing up their bathroom.

After that everyone shuffled out of the bathroom the man gave him a basket of new toiletries before explaining how the fancy-ass shower worked and showing himself out.

Tommy sat on the floor of the shower, running the water on cold water until his body began to shiver. Though the tiles themselves were dark grey the cement between them was white, so Tommy watched passively as the water between the tiles ran red with his blood. His chest ached with something he was too tired to try and decode and he sat motionless beneath the cold spray.

This wasn't new, the bouts of mental exhaustion hit him every once and a while, making his thoughts sluggish and his body more tired than it had any right being. What was new, he realized, was the sinking feeling in his chest that he recognized as *disappointment*.

Tommy was disappointed to be alive.

He had been so close to all of it just finally *going away* when Puffy and Ranboo had to pull him back into the thick of it. Just because he wasn't on his death bed anymore couldn't change the fact that something in Tommy cracked and he had given up. While he was bleeding out on the floor just feet from here he had decided that he was done fighting, but now he was alive and the struggles weren't going to stop just because he was tired of them.

With a start Tommy forced himself to stand and change the water's temperature as hot as it would go, nearly feeling like he was burning himself in the process but not caring. Tommy was smart enough to recognize where this train of thought was going. He glanced warily at the razor next to his shampoo but found himself holding the bottle a moment later.

He wasn't gonna go *that* far, but he also knew he couldn't keep doing this.

If Tommy kept putting himself in dangerous situations, he knew his survival instincts wouldn't be there to catch him anymore. But just because he didn't want to save himself didn't mean he wanted to stop helping people.

"You'll be no use to anyone if you're dead," his memories jeered at him.

He couldn't keep thinking about that, it would only drag him deeper.

So he forced his brain off and finished washing up on autopilot. Scrubbing his hair with shampoo until it stopped coming back pink, rubbing over the dried blood spots with a washcloth a little harder than necessary. He didn't touch the razor.

When he was done he turned off the shower and stood motionless in the steam for a bit. When he blinked he was looking in the mirror, wearing an oversized sweater that didn't belong to him and his own gym shorts, his hair was already half dry.

He closed his eyes and bit the inside of his cheek. He knew what this was and he hated it. He hated how vulnerable it made him, how little control he had when he wasn't fully present. He also knew that he did it to himself.

He blinked again and he was sitting on a stool at a kitchen island, staring blankly at the phone in his hand. He couldn't read what the news article said. He closed his eyes and when they opened he was looking at a half-eaten plate of food, the phone was face down next to it and there was a fork in his hand.

He didn't start to come back until he suddenly felt a hand close around his shoulder. Instinct forced him to flinch, ducking his head and hiding it behind his arms on the counter. Against his will, his body shook ever so slightly. He noticed that the food was gone now.

"Tommy?" That was Puffy's voice.

Fuck, he wasn't supposed to act like this in front of her. She was just a nice diner owner, she didn't want to hurt him. He forced himself to straighten in his seat, though he couldn't stop the shaking as he made himself look at her.

She was standing next to him and the edge of the island, one hand still raised next to him and the other on a stack of papers on the counter. "Hey buddy," she said, voice soft as her hand slowly lowered. "I'm sorry for grabbing you, I just needed to ask you something and you seemed pretty out of it. I shouldn't have touched you without asking." She watched him with an odd expression he couldn't quite place.

He forced a shaky smile, "S okay big P, you just startled me is all."

She smiled weakly, "Alright, sorry." She moved back to her papers on the counter. "I just wanted to ask you a couple of questions about your medical history. I was looking at your file and there's just a few things that I need to clear up. But if you're not feeling up to it, we can talk about this another time."

He shook his head, noticing for the first time that Ranboo was seated next to him at the island and that the pink-haired guy was across the room at the sink, seemingly doing dishes. “No time like the present, Puffs. Lay it on me.”

What followed was a series of short and easy-to-answer questions about his medical history. Stupid little questions about allergies and the possibility of asthma that forced Tommy’s brain to turn back on without actually making him think. Eventually, he felt far more grounded, able to recognize his surroundings and focus on more than just Puffy’s voice.

After a while, the questions petered out. “Feeling better?” Puffy asked.

“You, uh, you didn’t need to know any of that, did you?” he asked sheepishly.

She gave him a knowing smile, “No. But I do have one question I actually have to ask you if you’re up for it.”

Tommy considered it for a moment. If almost any other adult asked him a question like that, he would automatically assume he had no choice and say yes. But he’d known Puffy long enough that he knew she preferred his honest opinion over pleasing people.

“Is it important?”

She nodded, “A little. The answer could explain why the doctor’s healing powers backfired so harshly. I looked over the doctors’ files and some of their powers were somewhat incompatible, but it doesn’t explain why it was a complete reversal instead of the slight reaction I would expect.”

Tommy frowned, mentally preparing himself. *He* knew why it was a full reversal of their healing powers, which meant he was gonna have to lie to Puffy if she was about to ask what he thought she was. But there was no getting out of it after that explanation, it would be more suspicious to avoid the question.

“What do you wanna know?” He asked, keeping his voice as even as possible.

“Are you sure you don’t have any powers?”

There it was, the question that he tried to avoid like the plague. The question he never wanted anyone to know the answer to.

He forced a snort, grinning and ignoring the way Ranboo stilled next to him. “I think I’d know if I had powers, Puffy. You think I like being a minority that gets hate crimed while living in the foster system?” he scoffed for extra effect.

“No, I’m not saying that at all,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m just saying that some people’s powers can be very subtle and it’s not unusual for them to get diagnosed as powerless in childhood and discover powers later in life. If you have an invisible power it could have interfered with the doctor’s powers, making the rebound worse. If that’s the case, it would be important to know and put with your medical records for any future medical problems.”

Tommy sighed, shrugging. "I've been through the fuckin' run around with the powers test a million times. I don't have one and I'm not keen to be poked and prodded at again, thanks." That wasn't a complete lie either. People had suspected in the past that Tommy was hiding powers, but by some stroke of luck, any test they tried either came back negative or inconclusive.

Puffy sighed and nodded. "Okay, okay," she relented, "sorry to bring it up. I suppose a lack of powers could also have an effect of the rebound, but it's just one of those things you'll have to look out for in the future."

"I'd hope this never happens again," Tommy groaned.

"Me too, but you just need to watch out for the next few days. My powers aren't like other healing powers, so there shouldn't be any comedown effects. If you start feeling more tired or in pain than usual, *tell someone*, because that means my power's also rebounded."

"And if that's the case, we might have to put you through all the tests just to figure out what's wrong," the pink-haired guy added, leaning back against the now empty sink with a dishrag thrown over his shoulder. "'Cause if you rebound *her* powers, something's definitely not right."

Tommy sent the man a half-hearted glare. "Who the hell are you supposed to be again? The Walmart version of The Blade?"

Puffy made a strangled noise, slapping a hand over her mouth in a vain attempt to keep from laughing. The man just stared at Tommy, dark eyes unwavering. Tommy held the gaze in a challenge, unwilling to fold first.

The man blinked slowly. "No, I'm not," he said bluntly. "I'm Technoblade Watson, one of Phil's sons. Call me Techno."

Tommy resisted the urge to grimace at that. What a great impression to make on one of the people that now had full control over his well-being and living conditions. "Whatever," he muttered, looking away. "I'm sure I'll be fine, so let's just stop talking about it."

"Okay," Puffy agreed easily. "Just let someone know if you're feeling off at all, yeah?"

"Yeah, sure."

He'd just have to be careful about activating his powers for a while. He'd always been generally resistant to the effects of other people's power, but usually being aware made it easier one way or the other. He wasn't unconscious now so he could stop his body from naturally chipping away at the healing effects.

The kitchen had hardly been quiet for a second before Ranboo gasped. "Holy *cow*, Tommy, have you seen this?" he asked, flashing his phone.

Tommy snorted, rolling his eyes. "Considering I've been bedridden for the last week, I feel like the answer is no."

Ranboo completely ignored the sarcasm, shoving his phone into Tommy's hands immediately. Tommy frowned as he looked down at the phone, then resisted the urge to laugh as he read the article headline.

Famous Vigilante Theseus Confirmed Amongst Dead Following Major Gang Conflict.

If only, Tommy thought as he covered his mouth to hide his grim smile.

He went on to read the article outlining how they found an unidentified body amongst the dozens of gang members that matched all the information they had on Theseus. The Blade was brought into the Vulpine Agency's investigation to confirm that with all the information that had been gathered he could confirm that the remains belonged to the Vigilante.

They had somehow found Tommy's ditched gear in the bay near the body dump and part of his mask and hoodie in one of the suspects' apartments. Even Tommy had to admit that it looked convincing, with all the pictures of his recovered vigilante gear and the description of the damaged security tape. Then a slight problem occurred to him.

"You should make sure Tubbo knows," he told Ranboo, handing back the phone.

Ranboo blinked at him. "What— *oh*. Oh yeah, I should do that."

Tommy simply hummed in agreement. While it was true that all the vigilantes had eventually gotten over Connor's death, it didn't mean that it was pretty. The last thing they needed was the vigilantes going on another revenge crusade when Tommy wasn't actually dead.

"What's up?" Puffy asked curiously.

"A, uh, vigilante that we liked is dead, apparently," Tommy answered, staring down at his hands.

"Oh shit. That sucks."

"Yeah."

This... this would be hard to come back from. The heroes seemed very convinced that he was dead, and for at least a week or two he was sure he would have the Watson's breathing down his neck, making sure Puffy's healing didn't rebound. So he probably wouldn't be able to get out for a while.

Maybe he could just start again? Make a new vigilante persona a couple of months from now?

For what, a small part of him argued. *So that you can let the first mugger that you run into shoot you? Seems pretty pointless.*

It would be especially pointless if he managed to not die in the first week because his fighting style was *very* unique for someone his size. It would only be a matter of time before he ran into a hero that recognized it and had their suspicions. The time gap between Theseus's

death, Tommy's injury and the new vigilante's appearance would be too obvious if someone knew where to look.

"Well, are we really sure though?" Ranboo asked. "People have speculated about his death before, they could be wrong again." He was looking at Tommy now, expecting an answer to his thinly veiled question.

Tommy frowned, thinking about how to answer Ranboo's real question. *Are you really done? Or will there be a surprise comeback?* Tommy swallowed.

He thought about how out of his depth he felt caught in the middle of the gang war. How sick he felt watching men fall to their knees and crumble to dust. How scared he was, running half-blind in the rain trying to escape the men that wanted him dead.

He thought about the absolutely blinding fear he felt at the business end of Laura Blackwell's handgun. How instinctually nervous the men in suits and their briefcases made him. How tired he felt as he bled out in the rain, staring at the back door of Niki's bakery.

He thought about how awful his fever-induced nightmares were, how it felt to watch all his friends die. He thought about all the nightmares and panic attacks from before, how many nights he silently cried himself to sleep.

He thought about how relieved he felt as he finally stopped fighting to breathe on the bathroom floor. How comforting it was when his heart stopped.

Tommy couldn't go back to that.

"Nah," he answered Ranboo. "I think he's actually gone this time. Read the article, they found a body and everything."

Ranboo stared at Tommy for a moment longer before turning back to his phone. "Yeah... yeah. Fair enough, honestly." He offered Tommy a small smile that was probably meant to be reassuring but only looked as tired as Tommy felt.

Tommy returned the tired smile as best he could. At least Ranboo wasn't gonna hold it against him. He had no idea what to expect from the rest of their allies. To them, this would probably seem like it was coming out of nowhere, but looking back Tommy could see this coming.

Maybe a newly fourteen-year-old didn't have the critical thinking skills to consider the long-term effects of becoming a vigilante. And now here he was, sixteen and suffering the consequences. Huge surprise there.

"God," Puffy yawned. "Just looking at you two is making me tired, we should probably get heading back, Ranboo."

Ranboo ran a hand through his hair, yawning himself. "Yeah, that doesn't sound like a bad idea."

He pushed up off his stool and paused to study Tommy for a moment.

Tommy fixed him with a wary look, “What—” he never got to finish the thought as suddenly Ranboo had pulled him into a crushing embrace. It was only then that he realized Ranboo’s sling was gone. Puffy must have healed him too at some point.

“I’m glad you’re not dead Tommy,” he said quietly.

All Tommy could do was grunt in reply before he was quickly released and Ranboo stepped back.

“Whatever,” he muttered. “Thanks for letting me borrow your phone, not that it did me any good.”

Ranboo grabbed said device from the counter, stuffing it into his sweatshirt pocket. “Maybe next time you could try calling for help *before* it becomes a life or death situation. But you’re welcome, just make sure someone passes on your new number to me when you get another one.”

Tommy snorted, that was going off the assumption that he would be in this house long enough to get a new phone. “Sure thing,” he said. There was no point in starting that conversation in polite company.

After that Ranboo and Puffy quickly said their goodbyes before they used Ranboos power to teleport back to Niki’s.

Then Techno led Tommy back upstairs, getting him fresh sheets and helping him clean up his room. When Tommy suggested cleaning up the bathroom as well, Techno told him it was fine and that he would deal with it.

So not even half an hour later Tommy found himself alone again. The familiar routine of sitting down in a new room in a new house finally settling into his un-concussed brain.

He hated it.

Tommy had been in the foster system since he was five years old and he had never stayed in the same room for even a whole year. Over the years every family he lived with made one thing clear to him, Tommy owned nothing and was worth nothing to them.

Sure, the Watson’s were already obviously friends with some of the only adults Tommy had ever come to trust in his civilian life, but he didn’t doubt that it would end exactly the same here. He knew Ms. Thomas had to make a deal with Phil, probably something along the lines of ‘*just until he’s healed*’, which meant that Tommy’s days here were already numbered.

Tommy *hated* it.

He hated the plain guest bedroom. He hated his shitty backpack and his only two shirts getting covered in blood. He hated his shitty laptop and the Watson’s four-story townhouse. He hated that he could see the lake from their kitchen window. He hated that he couldn’t stay.

He hated that he wasn’t dead. That it wasn’t just over.

Tommy didn't even realize that he was working himself up until he was in the middle of the panic attack.

His breathing was completely erratic, no matter how much he tried to control it, it just kept getting faster and shorter. No matter how hard he tried to get in a real breath, the air refused to reach his lungs.

His face and hands started to go numb and his body went weak. He shook like a leaf in the wind as the world escaped him, dark spots encroaching on the edge of his vision like a cloud of static.

At least he had trained himself into silence during stuff like this years ago.

His eyes burned with tears that weren't there while all rational thought escaped him. He didn't even have enough thought to focus on what was freaking him out as his body took full control and drove straight off a cliff.

His jaw clenched painfully as his numb hands weakly tangled themselves in his hair, attempting to pull it for some semblance of a grounding touch. It didn't help as it only served as a reminder of all the times someone had grabbed him by the hair to stop him from running. His lungs burned as they screamed for some real air.

Eventually, after what felt like forever, Tommy's body began to succumb to the exhaustion that followed an attack. His breathing evened out into slow, shallow breaths like he was afraid breathing too much would restart the cycle. The shaking never quite stopped and his whole body felt like jelly as he collapsed on top of the bed's sheets.

He couldn't even think as the darkness closed in and he passed out for the night.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I have about two and a half chapters written ahead of this and I promise they catch a break soon. I don't know what I was on when I wrote this chapter but I was in a mood I guess. Sorry for the extra angst on your angst.

I also started school again this year and I can confirm that Art School is way more fun than Business undergrad. That said I'm posting my art for this on my Tumblr: <https://bluestrasa.tumblr.com/> (sorry I can't figure out how to link rn I'll figure it out later but I promise you'll like it if you like fanart)

Anyway, leave a kudos and comment if you've made it this far I crave validation <3

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Amnesia runs into trouble on Patrol.

Tubbo discovers some dangerous information.

The Captain joins an interesting mission.

Chapter Notes

And now for the plot :)

Here's my [Crumb](#), [Tubbo](#), [Ranboo](#) and [Techno & Dream](#) designs.

This one went through more major rewrites than any other chapter I've written so it might be a bit wonky or ooc, but I hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Amnesia, move!”

The vigilante pushed off the wall behind her hard, throwing herself into a dive roll just in time to avoid Captain Sparklez's attack. A beam of gold and red energy shot over her head, striking a piece of concrete that the villain had aimed at her.

The villain growled in frustration. “Dammit! Aren’t heroes and vigilantes supposed to be enemies? Why are you two working together?! Just beat each other up and leave me out of it!” He ended his sentence by stomping one foot against the ground, his powers activating to shoot up another column of concrete to try and fling Captain Sparklez out of the mouth of the alley.

“We have a common enemy though!” He called back, sidestepping the column attack and blasting the rock to pieces with a flash of gold. “We can always fight each other after you’re unconscious!”

Crumb used the hero’s bravado as a distraction, staying low to the ground as she flanked the villain, pinning him between her and Sparklez.

She flashed the hero a thumbs up and he winked at her before turning a glare on the man. “You don’t just get to attack innocent people ‘cause you think it's fun. There are

consequences to actions, so you can either surrender now or I'll make you," he said in a dark voice. If Crumb hadn't known the man for years she could almost believe it was real.

"Screw you, hero, you'll never beat me on your own," the villain spat back.

Captain Sparklez raised his hand, red and gold energy starting to build in little explosions that gave the illusion of actual sparkles. When he released his powered attack the villain's focus was solely on him as he used his own powers to create a solid cement wall to block the attack, leaving his back wide open.

Amnesia struck at the exact same moment, quickly pushing off the ground and slamming into the villain's back. One clawed hand dug into his shoulder, making the man cry out as her other came down with a taser to the centre of his upper back. His body tensed, seizing for a moment before he collapsed on the ground, eyes rolled back in his head, unconscious.

Amnesia replaced the taser on her utility belt and took a step away from her victim before cheering quietly, making Sparklez laugh.

"Nice one," he complimented, raising a hand for a high five.

Crumb bounced over and jumped as she returned it with a laugh. "Always fun to work with you Captain," she giggled. "But I gotta run now."

"Aw and miss the vigilante arresting? You're no fun," he pouted.

She grinned under her mask, sail swishing unconsciously behind her, "Well I do—"

"You're not going anywhere," a slurred voice interrupted from behind the girl.

The hero and vigilante tensed, whipping back around to see that the villain had somehow gotten back up. He was somewhat slumped where he stood, holding some sort of syringe over his now exposed forearm. Before anyone could protest he slammed the needle into his arm, pushing down on the stopper and injecting the liquid into his veins. The small syringe slipped from his fingers and shattered against the ground.

He laughed slowly before the sound began to pick up speed and power, bordering on the sound of insanity at its peak. As he laughed his powers activated, making his eyes glow so bright that they became small pinpoints of light, showing no colour or whites. A sickly green aura began to form around him, flashing and swaying with no rhyme or reason, like it was smoke curling off of a bonfire instead of the gentle glow it had been before. In the alley around them, every crack in the ground and walls began to glow with the same uncontrolled green energy.

"What the heck?" Sparklez muttered, slowly taking a step back.

Unconsciously a low growl started up in the back of Crumb's throat, instincts reacting to the danger before she could fully process it.

The villain laughed again. "You like it? It's this new drug called Trigger that's about to hit the market. Technically I'm a beta tester but it's all the same in the end. I get a neat little drug to

boost my power, and you both die. Sounds like a win-win to me,” he chuckled darkly.

Amnesia took a small step back while the world around them suddenly *exploded*. Everything made of any kind of rock within a three-block radius simultaneously shattered, creating a swirling hurricane of destruction with the three of them at the centre of it.

Thank god they were in a business district. Crumb hated to even think about what would have happened if they had been near a residential area.

Captain Sparklez took the initiative, sending a glittering column of exploding red energy directly at the villain, but the attack never landed. The ground under him erupted into wicked spikes the size of telephone poles. Somehow the man was able to maneuver so that he wasn't impaled, but it wasn't enough to save him from the force driving him back into the cloud of debris.

Crumb cried out as she watched him take a cinder block to the head. His body went limp and he fell through the swirling wall of rocks, taking more hits and landing painfully on large chunks of cement before he finally hit the ground beneath, blood on his face already beginning to soak into the dusty ground.

The villain cackled madly as Crumb turned back to look at him, eyes burning under her mask. “Your turn little lady,” he growled.

In reply, Amnesia did something she had never done in a fight before. She let out a mighty battle cry and directly charged him.

Under her feet, the ground exploded the same way, but she used every ounce of acrobatic skill in her body to dodge every single attack sent her way, slowly making it closer to the villain. When the ground spike attacks obviously failed, debris from the air began to fly at her head, but with her sixth sense power activated, she could feel every attack coming and gracefully dodged them.

The villain began to curse like a sailor, screaming at her like a madman and trying harder and harder to hit her with a single attack yet missing them all. Amnesia, for her part, was doing everything she could to keep his attention on her, not Captain Sparklez. She called out insults and threats as she made her way ever closer to her target, pissing him off just enough to tunnel vision his focus onto her.

Finally, she saw an opening in his barrage of attacks and dove through it, claws aimed at his throat. If she had to kill the madman just to save her friend then so be it.

Unfortunately, he saw her coming from a mile away. She arrived within his striking distance long before he was in hers, so he simply reached out and caught her by the throat. Crumb shouted in protest and clawed his hand bloody in a matter of seconds, but he only laughed and grinned at her.

Crumb gasped as she was suddenly flying through the air, the villain's hand still around her neck. She slammed headfirst into the ground, her face stinging as the mask absorbed the brunt of the attack and shattered. He lifted her back into the air and she could see him with

one visible eye while the screen inside the mask went dark, mostly obscuring her vision in the other. The hand around her throat tightened, cutting off her air supply and making her claw at his bloody hands with a renewed desperation.

“So long kitty cat,” he teased as her vision began to darken at the edges.

Crumb saw the red glow of Captian Sparklez power in the corner of her eye before the villain even knew what hit him. The red beam of explosive energy slammed into the man with enough force to knock him off his feet, forcing him to lose his grip on Crumb in the process.

Painfully she managed to scramble to her feet, wheezing for air as a second attack blew past with enough force and heat to singe her now loose hair as her hood flew off. At the edge of the storm's eye, the hero threw attack after attack, leaving barely enough room for the villain to defend himself.

Sparklez looked *awful*, though Crumb doubted she looked any better. The entire left side of his face was dark with drying blood and he stood at an awkward angle, cradling his side with one hand and throwing a barrage of destructive red energy attacks with the other.

Crumb made her way to his side as fast as she could, dodging around flying debris and half-formed earth attacks. “Are you okay?!” She shouted over the combined cacophony of his attacks and the swirling mass of rubble.

“Amnesia you need to get out of here now!” he yelled back instead of answering.

“Not without you!”

“Yes without me!” he said adamantly. “I can’t make it through that mess but you can! If you stay he’ll kill you, he’s too powerful!”

“You can’t take him on your own!” she protested. “You can barely stand! Just come with me, I can guide you through it!” She wasn’t even sure if that was true but she *refused* to leave him, Crumb didn’t leave her friends behind. Especially not so soon after losing Theseus.

“We both know that’s not true!” He laughed as he threw another huge attack. “I can’t hold him much longer so just get out of here! There’s no point in us both dying, you need to get out of here to tell someone about this drug! Think of the greater good here!”

“But—”

Across from them, the villain let out a bellowing war cry and the ground erupted into a wave of spikes. “No but’s! Now *go*,” he punctuated the order by shoving her none too gently into the hailstorm of rubble.

Crumb activated her powers immediately and set off, having no time to stop and think for even a second, lest she lose concentration and miss a piece of debris heading right for her. When it felt like both were a single second far too long the vigilante finally found her way out of the hurricane, leaping out into the peaceful street outside the radius.

Only the street was not that peaceful as there were two figures standing on the road in front of her.

Dream and Firebrand. Two of the top ten heroes, who could now see part of the vigilante's face.

However, Crumb didn't have any time to be worried about herself when she felt the overwhelming wave of relief followed by desperation.

"Please! I left Captain Sparklez behind!" she cried before either hero could speak. "He'll kill him! You have to help!"

Firebrand, the hero who had been in charge of hunting Amnesia for years now, could only blink in surprise for a moment. "What— who's— what's going on here?" he managed.

"Some villain with a geokinesis power took a power-enhancing drug he called *Trigger* after Sparklez and I beat him up. It— it made him go crazy and Sparklez is *injured*, and— and I just *left* him because he made me—"

"Okay, okay, it's okay," Firebrand soothed, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. "We'll make sure he's okay, but you should go home. I think you've had enough excitement for one night, kid."

"But—"

"*Firebrand*—" Dream protested. "She's a vigilante—"

"She's an injured kid," the flame hero countered. "We have enough shit to worry about tonight without vigilante paperwork on top of everything else." He turned to fix the teen with a serious look. "But if we ever catch you out as a vigilante again? I *will* bring you in. This is your final warning. If this wasn't enough to scare you off from vigilante work then know that I will take it *far* more seriously if I ever see you again. Understand?"

Crumb swallowed hard, nodding feverishly. "Please just save him," she begged weakly.

Firebrand nodded, "We will. Now *go*."

Crumb didn't have to be told twice, she trusted their ability to deal with the situation. The vigilante turned tail and ran as fast as she could with her injuries, setting out for the nearest entrance to the vigilante headquarters.

"Schlatt get you fucking hands off me right now—"

"Goddammit you're no fucking *fun* anymore!" Schlatt shouted, punctuating his sentence by throwing his mostly empty whiskey bottle at the wall behind Quackity.

Tubbo flinched as it shattered while Quackity just shoved Schlatt off of him. "You're a fucking goddamn *slob*, Schlatt. You think you're all *high and mighty* just because you finally

finished your fucking pet project, but when was the last time you really took a look at yourself? You really think I'm here cause I still *like* you?" Quackity burst out into laughter that was bordering on sounding insane. "Fucking as *if*. The last thing I want to do is spend any of my free time with another dying alcoholic, much less let him get handsy with me."

Dear God all Tubbo wanted to do was leave. But Schlatt would beat the shit out of him if he did.

"I'll show you fucking *handsy* you little *slut*," Schlatt growled. He lunged at Quackity, wrapping a hand around his neck and twisting the other into the front of his hero costume, slamming him none too gently into the wall. The goat hybrid leaned in so close that their faces were practically touching. "You think I won't give you up to the heroes if you disrespect me? That I actually give a shit about you and your goddamn flatty patty ass?"

Jesus. Maybe the beating would be fucking worth it at this point, the last thing Tubbo wanted to see was Schlatt and Quackity go at it.

"No," Quackity choked out. "But I think you *need* me. Without me and my intel, you'll never get ahold of that kid. So either get your *goddamn* hands off me," his eyes flashed a glowing green as he activated his powers, "or release the blackmail and be fucking done with it."

The room sat in tense silence for a minute, Schlatt's hand tightening dangerously in Quackity's shirt as the latter turned up his powers more, a green aura beginning to form around him.

Finally, Schlatt dropped Quackity, turning to make a b-line for the liquor cabinet. Quackity coughed weakly, hand coming up to rub at his throat.

"So you found something," he said, pouring himself a new drink and running a hand back through his hair.

"I did," the hero replied, eyes straying to make eye contact with Tubbo across the room. "But I don't see what this had to do with Tubbo."

Schlatt flopped down in his desk chair, kicking his feet up on his desk and swirling the dark liquor around his glass. "Mr. Tubbo here is gonna help us catch the kid. They're about the same age, so I figure Tubso would make a good decoy to lure him in."

Quackity raised an eyebrow. "You never involve Tubbo with field operations, what changed?"

Schlatt grinned drunkenly, his dangerous gaze shifting to Tubbo and pinning him in place. "We found a way to make Trigger without the source material, so now that he's not irreplaceable we can finally start using his amazing tech and brain for something actually worthwhile." He winked and Tubbo felt like he was going to be sick.

Quackity turned in a way that made it impossible for Schlatt to see the concerned look he shot the teen. "Sound's good to me," he said completely naturally, despite the expression on his face.

“So, *Ace*,” Schlatt drew out the sound of Quackity’s hero name, “what did you find out about the kid?”

Quackity turned back, face returning to a neutral look of annoyance. “His name is Thomas Innit, and for some reason, he has the protection of the rogue Karl Jacobs.”

Schlatt coughed, nearly choking on his drink while Tubbo’s heart stopped.

The kid Schlatt was after was *Tommy*. Tommy, whose power was the opposite of Tubbo’s. Schlatt wanted to make an anti Trigger. He wanted to use *Tommy* to do it.

This was all Tubbo’s fault.

He had been so caught up playing his little vigilante and hero-school games that he let his monitoring of Schlatt’s business fall to the wayside. They had been looking for Tommy for months and Tubbo had never bothered to try and figure out who their target was before he was told.

“Fuckin’ Karl *Jacobs*, Karl Jacobs?” Schlatt rasped. “Like the time travel guy?”

“Yeah... I uh, looked into the night you sent a group to the Blackwell’s to retrieve him and Jacobs was the one that attacked them after the kid escaped.”

Schlatt growled, “Shit.” He took a swig of his drink. “Where is the kid now?”

“He’s with a new foster placement uptown,” Quackity replied.

Schlatt’s eyes narrowed at the hero, “Quit fucking stalling and just spit it out. Who’s he with? Has anyone cased the place? How long is he supposed to be there? Answers, answers!” he slammed his glass down on the desk with a sharp noise that had Tubbo flinching again.

Schlatt either didn’t notice or didn’t care but Quackity turned to fix Tubbo with another look of concern. All Tubbo could respond with was a dark glare. Quackity wouldn’t understand why but the teen couldn’t help it because he was about to sell out *Tommy*. His first and best friend who until a few hours ago Tubbo had thought was *dead*.

“He’s with some guy named Phil Watson. He lives in a townhouse on Lake Drive. Nobody’s scouted it yet but it’s safe to assume that they have a high-end security system and that if we were to break in there would be a very quick response time from police or heroes,” Quackity reported in a bored tone. “Thomas is still recovering from extensive injuries from the night your men tried to retrieve him, he’s been there almost a week and hasn’t left the house. There are two younger men who have been seen going in and out, Watson’s sons Techno and Wilbur.” He glared at the goat hybrid. “Is that enough answers for you, Schlatt?”

Tubbo watched as the muscles in Schlatt’s jaw tensed and his eyebrows pulled low over his eyes. Instinctively every muscle in the teen’s body tensed while Quackity himself stepped slowly away from the desk, backing up next to Tubbo. Schlatt’s rage was so clear it was almost like you could see the smoke billowing out of his ears. Slowly, like a lion stalking its

prey, the man pushed up from his desk, rounding it to stand at his full height, towering over the young men.

“Can either of you tell me exactly what’s happening with my operation tomorrow?” he asked, voice deceptively even.

Tubbo opened his mouth to reply but all he managed was a strangled noise. Beside him Quackity’s eyes widened as he jumped to answer, covering Tubbo’s failure before Schlatt had the chance to blow up at him.

“You’re doing a public demo of Trigger then closing a few very important distribution deals as part of the operation launch,” Quackity managed, voice sounding far weaker than his rebellion from before.

That was one of the main differences between Quackity and Tubbo. Schlatt had put both of them through their fair share of hell, but Tubbo would always be the one that had nowhere else to go at the end of the day. Quackity had at least found enough courage to call the relationship quits, even if Schlatt never quite let him go.

“That’s right,” Schlatt praised, a mocking smile on his face. “And can anyone tell me what the next phase of my organization’s plan is after that?”

“To build up the reputation of Trigger, then slowly start introducing the Erasure drug into the market under a pseudonym, ensuring that you control the production and supply of both the competing drugs,” Quackity quickly answered again, saving Tubbo from having to break free of his fear-induced stupor.

“Very good. Tubbo,” the boy couldn’t hide his flinch which only made Schlatt’s eyes narrow at him, “can you tell me what the main problem with the next phase of the plan is?”

Tubbo took as deep of a breath as he could manage, ignoring the way that his knees were beginning to shake. “Yo— you don’t h-have the erasure drug.”

Schlatt hummed. The sound of the hard soles of his dress shoes clacking against the concrete floors was scarier to Tubbo than a gunshot could ever be. He blinked and suddenly he was looking up at the villain, whole body shaking against his will. Schlatt glared down at the teen, black eyes beginning to glow purple.

“Schlatt,” Quackity tried to intervene only to be met with a swift fist to the gut, sending him flying back into the coffee table between the two ratty couches. The scraping of the wooden table legs against the hard floor was thunderous in Tubbo’s ears, but he didn’t dare look back.

The loud sounds of Quackity wheezing as he tried to get air back into his lungs were drowned out by Schlatt’s quiet voice as he leaned into Tubbo’s space. “And what exactly am I missing to get the erasure drug?”

His lungs burned as though they had filled up with smoke and his fingers felt like icicles. Every cell in Tubbo’s body was waiting for the other shoe to drop but he forced his mind to

keep working, freaking out before anything actually even happened would make his punishment ten times worse. “You’re— you’re missing t-the asset,” he choked out, mindful enough not to accidentally say ‘Tommy’.

Schlatt leaned back, the purple glow dissipating from his eyes. He smiled, though the light didn’t reach his eyes. “Very good, kid.” He lifted a hand towards Tubbo, who flinched and closed his eyes, expecting a hit.

To Tubbo’s surprise, the hand landed in his hair and he opened his eyes to find Schlatt still smiling at him. The hand gently ruffled his hair then gently tangled through the boy's brown locks, combing through it in an almost kind motion. Despite himself, Tubbo relaxed. Schlatt had never been great but he hadn’t always been as bad as recently. Once upon a time, it wasn’t uncommon for the man to casually ruffle his hair or offer him a kind word.

“Oh, and Tubbo?” Schlatt said as though he had just remembered something.

Tubbo blinked, managing to look Schlatt in the eye as his instinctual fear faded. “Yeah?”

Slowly the fingers combing through his hair began to tighten and the fear returned tenfold. Schlatt took a fist full of Tubbo's hair, jerking the teen's head back and making the boy cry out. His hands came up to desperately claw at the hand holding him captive but only managed to make the man's grip tighten harder.

Tubbo nearly sobbed as Schlatt’s gaze caught him, his eyes burning purple as his powers activated again. “Don’t fucking stutter when you talk to me. When you show weakness, you give everyone else the advantage over you, and you fucking pay the price.”

He barely managed to take a full breath before the first hit landed, knocking all the air out of his lungs as the fist met his stomach. His knees immediately gave out, making his gasp for air more desperate as the grip in his hair was suddenly the only thing holding him up. Schlatt snarled, lifting Tubbo slightly higher before throwing him onto the hard concrete floor.

Tubbo managed to sneak in half a breath before the beating really set in. His arms came up to protect his head as Schlatt’s foot cut through the air to meet his now exposed ribs. Again and again, the man's dress shoes struck the teens' prone form, knocking the wind out of him when it slammed into his stomach and making the teen cry out when they nearly cracked his ribs.

His brain completely shut down, too busy being afraid and waiting for the beating to end to think about his next move, much less fighting back. In all reality it could have been as little as four good kicks or two dozen, Tubbo was in no state to tell.

“He’s had enough!” Quackity’s cries echoed under the ringing in his ears. “Schlatt stop!”

And just like that, the pain stopped. The only sounds Tubbo could hear were the sound of his own heart and his ears ringing. He sobbed, rolling into his back in an attempt to get any meaningful amount of air.

He caught movement in the corner of his eye and moved slightly to see Schlatt straddling Quackity, pinning him to the ground with one hand as the other swung into the hero’s face

over and over. After a few more good swings he shoved the younger man back against the ground and pushed to his feet, combing one bloody hand back through his hair and straightening his tie.

He sighed, glancing between the boy and his informant before stepping around their fallen forms. "I don't have time to deal with this," Tubbo registered his muffled voice. "Use whatever resources you have to and get me *that kid*. If I don't have him by the end of the year, I'm going to kill all your little hero friends," he directed at Quackity, "and lock you up like a lab rat for the rest of your life," his gaze was locked on Tubbo. Without another word the villain turned and made his way out, slamming the heavy metal door behind him.

The two laid in silence, both trying to recover as best they could. Slowly the blinding fear faded from his brain and the adrenaline went with it. His ribs ached like a bitch, some of them surely cracked and his stomach was painfully tender as he moved a hand to check his wounds.

The sounds of Quackity shuffling made Tubbo crack an eye open to see the man making his way over to him. He half sat half-collapsed next to Tubbo with a pained groan. "You okay?" he asked almost casually.

Tubbo managed a painful breathy laugh. "Peachy," he croaked. He swallowed painfully and closed his eyes again before speaking. "You can't give him Tommy."

He could hear the frown in the hero's voice. "Tommy? You know the kid?"

The teen hummed quietly. "He's my friend... you can't—I can't let him go through those experiments. Not— not him."

Tubbo's entire childhood had been filled with painful and shitty experiments by every crackpot evil scientist Schlatt could get his hands on. His goal for as long as the boy could remember had been to create a drug that emulated Tubbo's powers by any means necessary. It was awful but it was all Tubbo had ever known, and it wasn't something he would ever wish on anyone, much less Tommy of all people.

Contrary to popular belief, Tubbo did actually know quite a lot about the vigilantes he worked with. He knew that Charlie used to be a vigilante team with Memoir and Schlatt, he knew that Michale used to be a pro-hero, he knew that HBomb was a reformed villain. And he knew that Ranboo and Tommy were Orphans. He never finished reading Tommy's foster file but it painted enough of a picture. Tommy had had his fair share of shit and the last thing he needed was Tubbo's world crashing headfirst into his.

Quackity was quiet. Eventually, the lack of reply was too much to stand and he opened his eyes.

The young man was studying him, expression thoughtful before he sighed almost in defeat. He brought up a hand to wipe at the blood on his face and looked back at the closed door. "I'll try my best to run interference with this, but if push comes to shove I can't take your side. There are too many people relying on me and I'm not about to let Schlatt kill them over a kid that he wants alive anyway."

Tubbo took a shaking breath. He supposed there wasn't much more he could ask of him.
"Thanks, man."

"Don't thank me yet," he grumbled. "Once we fail to bring him the kid he'll probably get Minox to do it."

Tubbo slowly pushed himself up into a sitting position, wincing at the pain that laced through his torso. He sighed. "I'll work it out."

"Yeah?" Quackity asked, slowly pushing back up to his feet. He reached down, offering the teen a hand.

"Yeah," Tubbo replied, taking the hand. He grimaced as he stood up but forced it into a grin as he turned to face the hero. "I always find a way."

Quackity's smile was soft, contrasting harshly with his severely messed up face that was starting to swell. "Yeah, I know you do, kid. I'll talk to Karl and see why he felt the need to intervene, there's definitely some bigger picture if Mr. Time Travel himself is involved."

He blinked in surprise. "You know Karl Jacobs?" he asked incredulously.

Quackity's lips twitched into as much of a smirk as he could manage. "Something like that," he said cryptically.

Tubbo rolled his eyes, "Fine then, keep your secrets."

He chuckled weakly, "Fine, I will."

The two hobbled their way through the twisting dimly lit tunnels of the underground compound, heading towards Tubbo's room. Hushed voices, the scraping of boxes, combat boots and dress shoes echoed down the concrete halls as everyone else went about their business. Every face they passed watched the pair with a mixture of pity or hatred, not a single person stopping to comment or offer their aid.

They didn't speak the whole time, falling into a familiar routine once they made it to Tubbo's bathroom and retrieved the first aid kit.

Quackity had started to get involved with Schlatt when he was still in high school and they were screwing by his senior year. After that Quackity was the only person willing to risk Schlatt's ire to help patch Tubbo up, and then Quackity became the closest thing the kid had to a friend.

Once when Tubbo had been patching the older boy up he asked why he let Schlatt hurt him, why he kept coming back when he had another home.

The teen laughed, gently ruffling a thirteen-year-old Tubbo's hair. "You don't understand it right now, but sometimes we'll go to any lengths for the people we love. Even if it hurts you."

Tubbo hadn't really understood at the time. He never had any friends and would probably have taken the chance to run from Schlatt if he ever got one. It was different now. Though he

could never really understand what sick place Quackity and Schlatt's relationship had come from he did understand the willingness to get hurt for the people you cared about.

Once upon a time, he would have balked at the thought of hurting Schlatt, but all he could find himself thinking about as he patched up Quackity's face was what he would do to the man if it came to blows. Tubbo knew it would be hard and that he would probably lose, but he would rather *kill* Schlatt rather than let him touch a hair on Tommy's head.

"That's a pretty scary look you've got on your face, man," Quackity told him as he handed the teen an instant ice pack.

Tubbo sighed, pressing the cold bag against his ribs. "Yeah, well, I'm thinking some pretty scary thoughts, big Q."

He raised an eyebrow. "Oh? What's that?"

He raised his head, gaze burning into Quackity as he answered. "Just how far I'm willing to go for the people I love," he muttered.

Puffy frowned as she studied their surroundings. The strange red vines were definitely getting thicker the further they pushed into the city's underbelly.

It was rare that the leaders of three large agencies were called in for the same investigation, no less one in the middle of the day, but it did happen occasionally. The case had originally been brought to The Badlands agency by Zirconius. Upon further investigation into the mysterious red vines beginning to spread under their city, Onyx made the executive decision to put together a real task force before going any further.

So here she was, the day after drinking at Niki's and saving Tommy's life. The team consisted of Bad, Skeppy, Antfrost, Punz and Puffy. The Captain being called in incase there were any strange side effects from the vines. Refractz was added for extra muscle that Punz's powers could provide.

"Zirconius, I'm not so sure this is a good idea," Bad said once again.

"Yeah man, this is starting to look like some weird horror movie shit," Punz agreed.

"Language, Refractz!"

He snorted, "Sorry."

"It's not horror movie shit," Skeppy promised. "Seriously, it's just around the next corner and down a few tunnels. You've *gotta* see it, this thing's crazy."

Puffy shared a knowing look with Punz, who rolled his eyes. Bad never said anything about Skeppy swearing. It was kinda cute in her opinion but Punz obviously wasn't having it.

They made it the next few steps down the sewers and turned into the right tunnel. Everyone except Zirconius froze at the mouth of it, staring at the grotesque scene before them.

The whole tunnel was made of the red vines, some as small as the littlest spindle weeds they had noted on the way here while others were as big around a Puffy's arm. Amongst the vines grew strange glowing mushrooms, lighting the path deeper into the darkness.

The sight alone would be strange and foreboding, but what pushed it into being nightmarish was the skeletons. Entire remains of animals sat amongst the plants, vines and mushrooms growing through them. Hauntingly, all of the bones were bleached white despite having never seen the light of day.

That, and the *smell*. From the mouth of this turn in the system, the scent completely changed from that of dank wet cement to the smell of rot and iron.

The whole tunnel smelled like a bloody corpse.

Immediately the entire group protested, covering their mouths if their hero masks didn't already do so.

"What the hell man?" Punz complained. "You shouldn't be going down there without, like, a hazmat suit or something."

"Zirconius don't go any further," Puffy ordered. "We have no idea what's happening in here but it's obviously dangerous, look at all the animals that died."

"Zirconius, what's going on here?" Ant asked, a low feline growl starting in the back of his throat.

"Zirconius, please come back," Bad begged.

The diamond hero didn't pause until he heard Bad's voice. He turned back, only looking at Bad with a smile. "It's okay Onyx, I know what I'm doing. But you guys *have* to follow me, if we don't do something about this quick things are only going to get worse."

It was a classic hero thing. The world was about to end and there was no time to explain. It happened a lot in movies, but rarely in real life. The only time Puffy had ever experienced it was when she was an intern, left with only Tempest to stand against a plot to destroy the government's magic regulation systems.

This felt nothing like that. You could see those moments coming from a mile away, this was more like a man trying to lure you into the back of his van with the promise of shiny presents.

"Onyx he's lying," Puffy said without hesitation. She drew her battle axe. "He's been compromised by whatever this is. Don't listen to anything he says, it's not him."

Skeppy's face melted into a look of disgust as he turned to Puffy. "You know Captain, you're a bad friend—"

"Zirconius—" Bad protested.

“—But you know who isn’t a bad friend?” he continued, voice dangerously flat. His blue eyes flashed red, glowing in the darkness as he smiled. His bright blue hair began to take on a darker colour, flowing through it like water until it was *red*. “Scarlet.”

In the tunnel behind him, another pair of red glowing eyes appeared as a silhouette formed. Hannah Rose, the flowering hero, Scarlet Thorn, stepped into the tunnel behind Skeppy. One of Puffy’s employees that had been missing for days, her once red and pink uniform now a sickly pale white. The roses in her hair were withered and black.

“Sc— Scarlet,” Puffy stuttered. “Hannah I don’t know what’s going on here, but this isn’t you.” She shifted so her axe was in a ready position, having no illusion that she would be able to talk the younger woman down. “You don’t have to do this.”

“It’s okay Captain,” she said, voice sickly sweet and expression in the imitation of a smile. “You’ll understand what’s happening here *very* soon.” Around them all the vines began to shift, Hannah’s red eyes glowing pink as her power activated.

“Scar, don’t do this!” Refractz shouted as all hell broke loose.

The vines exploded into an unstoppable force, twisting and lashing out at anything they could grab. The heroes all reacted immediately, but it was of little use as their weapons couldn’t cut through the plants and they could only dodge for so long with the entire tunnel practically being *made* of the cursed vines. But none of them gave up, determined to fight the bloodvines until the last man standing.

Deep in the tunnels beyond the fight, a cacophonous voice *laughed*.

Chapter End Notes

This is going to be fun :D

The story itself is going to stay pretty SBI centric but every once and a while there’ll be a chapter or section from someone else’s pov just for the dramatic irony of it :3. There’s so much going on that some characters won’t know about until it’s too late while others were there the entire time.

Also yay MCC! I’m so happy Grian got his first win <3 But rip Ranboo and Wilbur with the third-place curse.

Leave a kudos and comment if you’ve made it this far, let me know how we’re feeling about these developments...

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Everyone has an interesting morning.

Phil and Tommy go shopping.

Chapter Notes

I took a break from writing this week and it was weird to come back and edit this. Not my favourite chapter but here it is.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Phil was pretty sure he had never seen anyone as miserable as Tommy Innit was the first morning he came down to the kitchen.

The night before had been filled with a bunch of long-running meetings surrounding general office upkeep that he had let fall to the wayside in his absence as well as planning for his official retirement announcement. In meetings like that Phil personally found it more helpful to keep his phone turned off, and since he was no longer on active duty he couldn't really see the problem with it.

He sadly discovered the problems caused when the meetings finally ended at nearly three in the morning. His phone's notifications immediately blew up with messages from the family group chat and Techno himself.

Wilbur: *Something is very wrong with tommy amd im not in a state to handle it*

Techno: *On a scale from one to Techno come home right now, how bad is it?*

Wilbur: *Please come home I can't do this right now*

Techno: *Be there in ten, just hang in there*

Techno: *Tommy almost died, but I called Puffy. You should probably get back here.*

Techno: *Your phone is turned off and you're an idiot.*

Techno: *Text me when you get this, Puffy and the other kid are leaving. I don't know what to do.*

Techno: *He went to bed, we're good.*

Phil silently cursed himself as he pressed the call button next to Techno's contact. It had been so long since he had to worry about foster kids that he forgot the most important rule: you're always on duty.

Techno picked up on the third ring.

"*You're an ass,*" his son informed him in a biting tone.

Phil grimaced. He honestly felt like deserved worse than that. "I know, I know. Just- what, what happened? Are you sure he's alright?"

"*I'm sure he'll live,*" Techno replied with a sigh, "*but he's sure as hell not alright.*"

He grit his teeth, tucking away his wings as he stepped out of the elevator into the parking garage. "What happened?"

"All of the doctor's healing powers did a full rebound. His injuries had been slowly un-healing over the last week and last night they completely reversed. He wasn't breathing and his heart had just stopped when Puffy arrived. She brought him back, but he didn't seem very happy about it."

Phil frowned as he opened his car door and slid in. "He didn't seem happy about being alive?"

"He made some concerning jokes and was generally grumpy when he wasn't dissociating or pretending to be happy go lucky," he reported bluntly.

“Well, I’m not sure I’ve ever met someone that was in a particularly good mood after a near-death experience like that.”

“That’s probably true.”

Phil dug in his pocket, retrieving his keys and putting them in the ignition without turning it. He sighed again. “Is Wilbur alright?”

“At this moment probably. I came back and made him go over to Niki’s for their post-patrol drinks. He doesn’t know yet.”

It was a good idea, Wilbur’s recent episodes of general anxiety would have made the rest of the night miserable even if Tommy were fine. “He’s not going to be happy when he finds out you didn’t tell him,” Phil warned.

“Better than him freaking out about it right now. He’s already had a bad week from the sound of it, best not to set him off for no good reason. It’s already over with.”

Phil hummed. “That’s fair,” he agreed. He reached for the key, bringing the car to life with a soft ding from the computer. “I’ll be home in a bit, sorry I didn’t come earlier.”

On the other end of the line, Techno huffed. *“It’s fine, just don’t turn your phone off again. It was bad enough as it was but I’m pretty sure the kid decided he doesn’t like me, so make a good impression tomorrow.”*

He frowned. “He doesn’t remember his tour?”

“Don’t think so, the rebound was already starting to set in by then so the concussion was back.”

“Ah.” This would be interesting then. “Well, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. See you in a bit.”

“See ya.”

And that brought them to this morning, where Wilbur had been predictably very unhappy with his brother and friends for hiding the previous night’s incident.

He had been very near setting into a full-blown shouting match with Techno when Tommy came downstairs and he immediately dropped it, giving his brother a *we’ll finish this later* look that was met with an indifferent shrug as the other left the room.

A few minutes later Phil was making a pot of coffee and watching an extremely disgruntled Tommy stare glumly at the bowl of cereal in front of him.

“You should try glaring at it harder,” Wilbur suggested, sliding onto the stool one over from the teen, “maybe it’ll eat itself.”

“Maybe you should fuck off,” Tommy replied in a painfully raspy voice.

Will only laughed in reply and Tommy turned to glare at him before tensing. He turned ever so slightly so he could watch Phil out of the corner of his eye, expression tired but wary.

Phil only shrugged, smiling slightly. "If he's gonna be an ass he should be able to take the heat for it," he told the boy. "You're good, mate."

Instead of relaxing as Phil had expected, Tommy turned to fully stare at him like he had just spoken another language. Phil raised an eyebrow, "Something wrong?"

Tommy continued to give him the bewildered look for a long moment before answering slowly. "You're... not mad at me for insulting your kid?"

Phil snorted and smiled sympathetically. He always forgot how jaded kids like Tommy could be, already expecting nothing but harshness from the world. "No, I'm not. Wil's a full-grown man, if he's gonna be a prick I'm not gonna get mad at you for retaliating."

"I'm not being a prick!" Wilbur complained through a mouthful of cereal. "It was just a suggestion!"

Just as Phil was about to start lecturing Wilbur for good measure Techno walked in, completely unaware of the interaction that had just transpired.

"You know Tommy," Techno began as he entered the kitchen, breezing past Phil towards the stove, "you actually have to *eat* the food to get its nutrition."

Understandably, Tommy groaned, shoving the cereal away and burying his head in his arms on the counter. "What lovely young men you've raised," came his muffled response to Phil.

"I'm just saying, it kinda defeats the purpose of healing all your injuries if you're just gonna starve to death later," Techno muttered, moving about to collect ingredients for his breakfast.

"Maybe that's the fuckin' point dickhead," the teen moaned into his arms.

Techno frozen, hand hovering over the carton of eggs. Wilbur flinched, just barely saving his spoonful of cereal by catching the food with his hand before it hit the counter.

Phil grimaced. Techno had warned him the boy seemed a bit off, but that was a bit more direct than Phil had been expecting.

Despite how irresponsible he had been the night before, Phil had not only raised his own sons but been through his fair share of traumatized teenage interns. He knew from experience that he couldn't just let this sit.

He shot his sons both meaningful looks, simultaneously trying to reassure them and ask for some space. They both seemed to get the message as Wilbur dumped his handful of soggy cereal back into his bowl and Techno moved to return the eggs to the fridge. Phil slowly made his way over to the island to stand next to Tommy, staying silent until his sons had cleared out of the room.

Tommy sighed, deep and far too world-weary for someone his age. He slowly pushed himself up from the counter, not meeting Phil's eyes. "Look, can we just skip the lecture? I'd like to just take my punishment and go, it'll waste less of both of our time."

Phil... Phil was not expecting that. He found that it was an unwelcome surprise as he swallowed down the rage that sparked in his chest. He didn't even want to know what Tommy thought constituted a punishment, or why he even felt like he had done something to warrant Phil's ire, but he could guess. Wilbur hadn't been dissimilar when he first stayed with Phil, just far less direct and obviously done with the cycle of violence.

"You're not in trouble Tommy," Phil told him firmly. He didn't want any miscommunication here, it could be detrimental to their entire dynamic going forward if he wasn't careful.

The teen turned a wary expression on him. "So what, is Ms. Thomas coming back for me today? I remember hearing that this was an emergency placement until my wounds healed. So now that I'm all better it's time to ship me off, right?"

"No Tommy, I'm not sending you back today."

"Then what!" Tommy suddenly exploded, shoving off his stool and rounding on Phil. "You're obviously not here to starve me, so if you're not here to beat me or send me packing then what? Why send off the terror twins? What could you possibly want from me?"

If one could feel their heart breaking, Phil would have noticed a large chunk of his own shattering to dust. The edge in Tommy's voice was desperate, desperate and scared because he didn't know what to expect from the adults in his life aside from suffering. Now that he was faced with Phil simply trying to show him kindness all it was doing was pushing the boy further away because all he knew was that he couldn't predict anything about Phil's behaviour.

"I just wanted to ask you if you're feeling alright," Phil answered earnestly, making Tommy stare at him. "I noticed you weren't really getting along with Wilbur or Techno and figured you'd be more comfortable without them picking on you."

Tommy's jaw tensed as he searched Phil's face with desperate eyes, like he was trying to read his mind for the correct answer. "I'm fine," the boy answered tersely. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because you almost died last night."

At that Tommy's hands curled into fists, knuckles white from the pressure. When he turned to look back at his untouched cereal bowl instead of answering, Phil continued in a soft voice.

"It's alright to be not okay after something like that, mate. Honestly, I'd be more concerned if you *weren't* shaken up by it. It's fine if you don't want to tell me, but I just wanted to ask in case you wanted to talk about it."

"Well I don't," he spat in reply.

"Okay. That's fine. But I think you should find *someone* to talk to about it-"

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” he cut Phil off. “Don’t make me see a fucking therapist about this. I hated them before I had real issues and the *last* thing I want to do is sit in a fucking room with one for an hour while they lecture me about a healthy sleep schedule or some useless bullshit.”

He resisted the urge to sigh. This kid was a whole new level of messed up that Phil hadn’t encountered before. Which was impressive considering Techno was raised in a blood-worshipping death cult.

“Well I was going to suggest it eventually but I won’t make you do anything you’re uncomfortable with,” Phil replied instead. “But what I was going to say was to talk to someone you already trust, like your friend Ranboo or an adult you know like Puffy or Niki.”

Tommy blinked at him, looking so confused that he seemed to entirely forget that he was supposed to be angry. “How did you know I know Niki?”

“She’s a friend of Wilbur’s and mine. When I mentioned I was fostering you she told me that you used to work at the bakery,” Phil lied easily. He had actually heard the story through Wilbur while he was explaining how Whisper and Nix saved the boy. “And she’s fostering Ranboo, so if you two feel like hanging out or chatting in person I think we could probably work something out.” He smiled reassuringly.

Tommy was silent, still studying Phil like he was trying to dissect him where he stood. Eventually, the boy sighed, sagging back onto the stool still behind him. “Alright, I’m too tired to play this stupid game. Are you like Puffy?” he asked bluntly.

Phil frowned. “Like Puffy?” he repeated.

Tommy nodded, “Like Puffy. When I started working for her she eventually pulled me aside and gave me this huge lecture about how I didn’t need to say stuff I thought would please her, that she would always value and respect my honest opinion way more than me blowing sunshine up her arse. When I worked for Niki I eventually figured out she was the same way. You’re friends with both of them and haven’t smacked me for swearing or being disrespectful yet so I figure you’re probably similar, yea?”

And god Phil could hug Puffy at that moment. She had always been the kind of person that could cut through someone’s bullshit within five minutes of meeting them. She was such an unapologetically genuine person that she was probably one of the only people on the face of the planet that could tell a kid like Tommy that she valued their opinion and actually be believed at face value. Phil had tried his best to emulate that ever since he met Puffy when she was a young intern, but there was nothing like the real deal.

“Yes,” Phil breathed out, trying to hide the relief in his voice, “Puffy, Niki and I all have that in common. I don’t want you to try and bullshit to make me happy, I want your honest opinions and feelings so that I know where we’re at, alright mate?”

Tommy was still studying Phil hard. Phil knew there was nothing else he could do but sit there and wait for the boy to make up his mind. If he took the olive branch, it would be a very

good start to their relationship, if he didn't then Phil would just have to work on proving that he was someone that could be trusted.

"Puffy also said that it was a two-way street, she didn't bullshit me either. It's different when she and Niki were my bosses. I've never met a foster parent that didn't lie to me one way or another."

He again resisted the urge to sigh. While he completely understood why most kids like Tommy had trust issues, it didn't make them any more fun to deal with.

"I can't promise that I won't lie to you for your own safety Tommy. As your caretaker, it is my responsibility to ensure your wellbeing and safety. In order for me to look after you sometimes I'm going to have to omit things." Tommy was smart, there would be no hiding the fact that there was a secret Phil's family was keeping, so he couldn't make empty promises.

"But what I *can* promise you is that everything I do is in your best interest, not just mine. If you have a problem or concern with my actions I encourage you to discuss it with me. I will never punish you for asking questions or voicing concerns about how you feel that you're being treated, all I want is to help you in any way that I can."

The kitchen was quiet save for the soft gurgling of the coffee maker. Eventually, the boy sighed. "Whatever," he muttered, "do you want to have any more strangely deep conversations or can I go? I'm like two weeks behind on school work."

Phil would count it as a win for today. That honestly went better than he had thought it was going to. "I was actually going to ask if you wanted to go shopping today. I heard down the grapevine that you're down to your last pair of pants," he pointedly looked at Wilbur's sweater that the boy was wearing. "Plus I figured we could get some stuff to make your room feel more like yours since you're probably going to be here a while."

The boy frowned at him. "You're serious aren't you. You're actually planning on letting me stay past an emergency placement."

He smiled, "The arrangement was that Ms. Thomas would check in after three months to see where we stand. I have absolutely no problem letting you stay as long as you're comfortable with it. If in three months you still want to be here, we can make arrangements for the permanent placement paperwork."

"You mean if *you* still want me here," he said, a challenge in his eyes.

"Nope. I mean that if *you* still want to be here," Phil affirmed. "Like I already said, I'm more than willing to let you stay here as long as you like. If you get comfortable and want to stay, you can. I'm more than happy to let you stay with me until you age out, and even then you'd be more than welcome to stay after."

There was no turning back now, but Phil couldn't really find it in himself to regret it. Clare would probably tease him relentlessly about this but it was exactly what happened with

Techno and Wilbur. Phil couldn't find it in himself to stand idly by and watch a kid with so much potential suffer because people weren't willing to give him the time of day.

Even if Wilbur and Techno had never gotten caught up in a gang war over their powers, Phil still would have adopted them in his own time. Wilbur was so scared of his own powers that he refused to talk, resulting in years of misunderstandings and abuse. Had Phil left him to move on to the next home there was no telling where he would be today. Techno had been raised in a dangerous cult and if Phil had let him fall into the foster system he had no doubt that the man he now called his son could have become the most dangerous villain in modern times.

Tommy was no different. If Phil were to let him pass through, to call Clare and tell her that the boy was healed and he was ready to move on, he could never forgive himself. It didn't take a genius to see that the teen was tired, that he wasn't okay. He agreed to take Tommy in because he knew the world was dangerous for powerless teens, but it was obvious that it had already taken its toll. Tommy needed stability in his life and Phil had everything he needed, so who was he to deny it to the boy.

He held no illusion to think that this would turn out exactly like his sons. There was a huge difference between two twelve-year-olds who had been in the system for only a few months or years versus a sixteen-year-old who had been in the system since he was four. If Tommy wasn't looking for a family, Phil wouldn't push it. But he had to do everything he could to offer the boy a safe place to call home at least until he was old enough to handle himself.

The boy stared at him with an expression Phil couldn't quite read before rolling his eyes. "You've obviously gone senile in your old age, I'll make sure your sons put you in a good home."

Phil's mouth dropped open in shock before he laughed incredulously. "Oh come on! How old do you think I am?! I'm not senile I'm serious!"

The boy shook his head, obviously spurred on by Phil's reaction. "You may look just over thirty but your sons are obviously in their twenties, so your powers must be doing you a favour." He sighed wistfully, "It's a damn shame too, I bet you were quite the philanthropist in your day, using all your money to help poor little orphans."

"Oh for the love of— do you want to go shopping or not you little shit?"

The teen stood, walking up to Phil and gently patting his shoulder. "Sure thing Phil, we can go shopping with what little time you have left," he said in the most patronizing tone anyone other than his sons had ever directed at Phil.

"Piss off," Phil rolled his eyes, shrugging Tommy's hand off but smiling despite himself. Tommy laughed weakly, moving towards the living room door. "Go ask Will if he has anything that'll fit you then we'll leave in twenty yeah?"

"Of course Phil, anything you need before your time's up," he answered, still in a patronizing tone.

“Just go!” Phil laughed, waving the teen off.

For his part Tommy at least seemed to be having fun as he laughed again, slipping out into the living room towards the foyer. Phil couldn't help but feel a little pleased, if the boy was comfortable enough to test the waters with jokes at his expense then he must be doing something right. They would just have to take this one step at a time.

Overall Tommy's day thus far had been pretty shit.

He had a shit morning when he woke up and remembered he was alive and in a new foster home. His morning was not improved when he ran into Phil's brunette son in the bathroom and the man asked if he was feeling alright, studying him like he had x-ray vision or telepathy. It got even worse when the two young men teased him over not eating his cereal that he honestly did not think he could stomach and then much *much* worse when Phil made them leave for a private conversation.

His feelings towards the morning were only confused by his conversation with Phil. Though he spent the first half terrified by the seemingly fake nice man and what he would do to Tommy behind closed doors he was completely thrown off by what he found. The man was definitely a friend of Puffy's, he seemed to be completely genuine and direct in everything he said, even admitting that he would probably end up lying to Tommy at some point. Somehow that made him one of the most trustworthy people Tommy had ever met, which felt so strange.

And what was stranger was that the man seemed totally convinced that he was willing to take Tommy in permanently, just like that even though he knew nothing about him. Actually, it was worse, because if he read Tommy's foster file then he should know that Tommy was in fact a troubled child who should never become a permanent fixture in someone's family. So while his instincts wanted him to tentatively trust the man, he was obviously insane. The waters would need more testing before Tommy decided he was willing to stay there. He'd never had a choice in the matter before, so it would be interesting to see if he actually did this time.

To be honest Tommy wouldn't mind being able to stay in one place until he was old enough not to have to deal with this bullshit anymore. Especially if it was a nice place like this, even if Phil was nuts, Techno was a dick and Wilbur was a bit overbearing. He couldn't think of a single place he had lived where they would ever take him cursing and joking casually at face value, where they didn't immediately call him disrespectful and punish him.

Overall he would have to rate the conversation as neutral, seeing as it started with the fear of a beating and ended with him testing the waters by teasing the man, it all evened out.

Then he went upstairs and immediately had to deal with Wilbur again. Their light-hearted chit-chat quickly dissolved into bickering as Wilbur teased Tommy for being so skinny and Tommy called him a gangly bitch who was probably shit at guitar. To say the least, the man didn't take it very well as he called Tommy a small child who wouldn't know good music if it slapped him in the face.

So now here he was, slumped in the passenger seat of Phil's car and heading for the nearest department store and wishing that he didn't feel so shitty. It was pointless now, he was still alive and that wasn't really going to change anytime soon, so he should just get over it and deal with his life. He was still a foster kid, stuff was still gonna suck. At the very least he could at least try and appreciate the fact that so far it seemed like he was in a decent home and that he wasn't about to go out and get his ass beat by heroes or villains any time soon.

But no, apparently he was just going to keep being miserable and continue to start pointlessly mean fights with the people he lived with. Boy did he love the way his brain worked, always so helpful for making friends. It was exhausting.

Shopping itself was... kind of stressful, to say the least.

Tommy had spent almost his entire life living with low-income families or group homes. The only time he ever got new clothes was when the ones he was wearing were two sizes too small and his shoes had holes in them. Even then most of the time his scarce new clothes were bought without him present or usually at a second-hand store.

A giant Target in the middle of a mall was not somewhere Tommy had ever spent time. He couldn't say that he really enjoyed it.

There was way too much going on. Huge crowds of people made navigating through the store far more of a task than Tommy had prepared himself for. It was a Saturday, so they couldn't have picked a busier time to try and weave their cart through the crowded aisles and find what they needed with people constantly in the way.

"Alright," Phil had announced as they grabbed a cart at the entrance. "We need clothes and room decor for sure. Maybe a new computer if you're going to stick with online school, I noticed how trashed your other one is. Oh! And probably a phone, yeah? Techno mentioned you were just borrowing Ranboo's so we should probably get you your own. Anything else you want?"

Tommy stopped dead in his tracks, completely caught off guard by everything the man had just said. Usually going out to shop for new clothes consisted of following his guardian around while they did all their shopping then standing there as they picked out three new outfits for him. Sometimes if they were really nice they'd let him pick. Not once had Tommy been the main priority of a shopping trip. Nobody ever wanted to get decorations for his room, or even consider offering him a new computer. Maybe twice had he been given a phone but they always took them back when he left.

Before he had the chance to decide if he wanted to tease Phil or genuinely tell him it was too much someone shoulder-checked him as they passed, making Tommy flinch and hurry to catch up with Phil.

Phil gave him a concerned look as he fell into step beside him. "You alright mate? If this is too much we can come back another time."

How the hell was this guy so nice? He went out of his way to prioritize Tommy but was willing to leave it at the drop of a hat? To just waste his time for Tommy's sake?

The teen searched for the words to describe what he was feeling but when nothing came to him he shrugged. “We’re already here,” he managed.

Phil searched him for a moment longer before nodding slowly. “Alright, well why don’t we start with clothes and see how you’re feeling from there, yeah? Don’t be afraid to tell me if you’re uncomfortable or overwhelmed, I’ve got no problem coming back another time.”

He tried to reply but found no words, so simply hummed in agreement and nodded.

The two navigated the huge store to the second floor where all the men's clothing was. When they arrived at their destination Tommy did not feel any less lost.

“If you see anything you like just grab it,” Phil told him, much to Tommy’s momentary confusion. He forgot the man was rich and most likely did not care about the price of some stupid clothes.

Tommy nodded and slowly started to make his way through the clothes. He decided that black would probably be the best option, it didn’t show stains or wear and tear as much as other colours did. So he tried his best to stay away from other shoppers as he went through the athletic wear and t-shirts, collecting three pairs of pants, a pair of basketball shorts, three t-shirts and one long sleeve.

After finding what he needed he was forced to wander around and look for Phil, who had apparently moved further into the clothing section. Eventually, he spotted the man looking at winter jackets.

“Just dump it in the cart,” Phil told him as he approached, still sifting through the jackets.

Tommy did as he was instructed when Phil picked one out of the rack, holding it up for Tommy to see. “What about this one? I saw that you had that old red hoodie, but if you don’t like this there are tons here.”

He stared at the jacket, not comprehending for a moment. It was a heavy red coat with cream white fur lining the hood. Phil was asking him if *he* wanted the jacket and it wasn't even fall yet, heck it was barely September.

“Don’t like it?” He asked when Tommy didn’t react.

He jolted, “N-no, it’s fine. I like red.”

The man nodded, moving to place it in the cart when he spotted Tommy’s meagre clothing haul. “That’s all you’re getting?” Phil asked with a frown.

Tommy could only manage a shrug, not really able to form much of a reply despite the burning anxiousness he felt at the man's displeasure.

He placed the jacket in the cart with a sigh, “You can—” he paused, looking back up at Tommy. “Have you ever really been clothes shopping before, Tommy?” he asked, tone painfully gentle.

Tommy shifted nervously, slowly shaking his head. He was beginning to feel stupid for not being able to respond, Tommy was a freaking *vigilante*. He went out at night and beat up bad guys and saved lives *for fun*. He should be able to handle a crowded store and talking to the nicest guardian he'd ever had. He found himself staring at his ratty shoelaces.

Phil was silent just long enough for Tommy to consider looking up, wanting to know what the other was thinking. Then suddenly Phil was crouching down in front of him, moving into his line of sight and looking up at him. "Not in a very talkative mood?" he asked kindly.

He sighed and found himself nodding. That was a pretty decent way to describe what Tommy was experiencing. Granted, it wasn't like he never went through silent periods, he never spoke when he was doing vigilante work.

Phil smiled gently and nodded. "We can still go home if you want, I know you had a pretty crappy night. And morning probably, I know the boys were pushing your buttons at breakfast before our talk."

Somehow Tommy found himself protesting immediately, shaking his head. "We're already *here*," he insisted in a low voice.

"Okay, okay," Phil relented easily. "Do you just want to get out of here with what we have and come back another time?"

He considered for a moment and shook his head. "I'd rather not have to come back," he nearly whispered.

The other chuckled lightly, "Alright, then do you want some help so we can get out of here quicker?"

Tommy hesitated before nodding and Phil smiled again, standing easily. He moved back to the cart, waiting until Tommy raised his head again. Phil gave him a reassuring look then moved deeper into the clothing section.

They spent almost the next hour in the store, Phil holding up clothes for Tommy to judge with a simple nod. Any time Tommy so much as even glanced at an item Phil would pick it up for him to consider. It was... nice almost. The older man filled the silence with random small talk, unimportant news or simple questions that could be answered with a yes or no. If it hadn't been for the still oddly large amount of people in store it probably would have been enough to calm Tommy down.

They made their way through and out of the clothes and into the shoes, where they got Tommy a new pair of black sneakers, red converse and a sturdy pair of winter boots as well as an assortment of socks. From there they moved onto the home section, getting him curtains, a new set of sheets, a red duvet cover and a weighted blanket at Phil's suggestion. When Tommy's eyes lingered on a bedside lamp and a stack of posters for too long they ended up in the cart as well.

On their way out they passed through the tech section, popping in to see if they had any phones worth getting. While Phil investigated that Tommy found himself in the video games,

staring longingly at the console versions of Minecraft.

“We do have a Playstation and Switch at home if you want anything,” Phil informed him, suddenly standing behind the teen. Tommy flinched in surprise and Phil winced. “Sorry if I startled you.”

“You didn’t,” Tommy deflected automatically, though it was an obvious lie. He looked at the games again before gently grabbing the Nintendo Switch version. Playstation was the only console version without crossplay.

Phil gingerly accepted it with a smile, placing it on top of their rather full cart. “They haven’t got any tech worth buying here, so I’ll just pick you up something another time. Other than that I think it’s about time to get out of here, yeah?”

Tommy nodded, easily following after as Phil made his way back to the main path.

On their way out they happened to pass by the toys section when something caught Tommy’s eye. There was a display of Minecraft-related toys, pixelated versions of diamond and netherite swords alongside plush and cutie versions of mobs which never failed to entertain Tommy. A Minecraft enderman looked about as much like a real one as a sheep did, which was to say kinda, but not so much. Not that he had ever seen a full enderman in person. Or a sheep for that matter.

Feeling a burst of confidence he ducked into the empty aisle, eyes quickly scanning until he found what he was looking for. A spider plush, to name after his pet spider Shroud in his now forever lost survival world. After a moment’s thought, he grabbed a foam diamond sword as well.

When he returned to the cart with both toys Phil grinned, nodding as Tommy hesitantly placed them in the cart’s basket.

When all was said and done Phil didn’t let Tommy see the total cost, instead exiling him to start arranging the bags while he paid.

Tommy ended up with three bags of clothes and bedroom items while Phil carried the weighted blanket and two more bags. Part of Tommy thought it was wasteful to get him so much stuff when he wouldn’t be able to take it all in a few months, but he ignored it in favour of focusing on where he was going.

Unfortunately, the only place to park had been the rising parking garage that belonged to the mall, making their fastest way back through the even more crowded building. As the two struggled to make their way through the mass of people Tommy watched in awe as black wings began to unfold from under Phil’s jacket.

Tommy hadn’t even known Phil was an avian hybrid. He hadn’t had his wing’s visible when they first met the previous week or at all after Tommy woke up. Once his large wings were fully visible it was suddenly easier to move through the mall as people respectfully moved out of their way to make room.

One of his wings shifted back towards Tommy, curling around his back and pulling him in front of Phil. Tommy stared at him with wide eyes and Phil laughed.

“Sorry, I guess you haven’t seen these yet, huh mate?” he chuckled.

“Uh-uh,” Tommy replied intelligently.

Phil snorted, easily guiding them through the crowd towards the stairs nearest their garage entrance. Tommy started up them as Phil’s wings vanished again. “I tend to keep them tucked away a lot of the time, just for space convenience. But sometimes taking up more space can be just as helpful.”

Tommy hummed in agreement, pausing at the top of the staircase to let a large group of college-age kids pass in front of them. A young man with red hair and animal ears of some sort shot a surprised look their way, slowing and causing the kid in the beanie behind him to trip.

“What the hell Fundy?” beanie kid cursed.

“Hey Phil,” Fundy said, giving Tommy an odd look.

Tommy glared at him as the rest of the group slowed, all shooting greetings Phil’s way and giving Tommy equally odd looks. “Hey boys, funny seeing you all out and about together.”

“We all got the weekend off,” Fundy explained. “Figured we may as well actually try to have fun for once,” he laughed.

Phil chuckled, “Well in that case don’t mind us. Enjoy the downtime.”

“Oh we will,” replied a black-haired man, throwing his arm over beanie guy’s shoulders and winking. Beanie guy laughed, turning to the other and wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

The rest of their group devolved into groans and complaints, all simultaneously berating their friends as they burst out laughing and pulling them away from Phil and Tommy.

Phil sighed and shook his head fondly as the group vanished into the crowd.

“A bit young to be friends of yours, eh?” Tommy found himself questioning.

“They’re old classmates of Wilbur and Techno’s,” he explained, “sorry you had to see that.”

Tommy shrugged. “It was kinda funny,” he admitted as they turned to walk in the opposite direction of where the boys had gone.

Phil’s lip twitched slightly. “Maybe just a little but don’t let Sapnap or Quackity know that, they’ll never stop otherwise.”

Tommy snorted, “Noted.”

They walked the rest of the way in silence. Tommy considered how he was ever going to form a proper thank you for all the stuff Phil had just bought for him. He knew that the man was rich and probably didn't even blink at spending so much money, but that didn't mean Tommy shouldn't thank him somehow, he would always be in Phil's debt after this.

Just as he settled on the idea of saying a simple thanks for now a distant booming shook the building.

All around them everyone stopped what they were doing, the ambient noise in the mall falling into hushed whispers and the crowds slowed to a stop. The sound of the distant boom came once again, this time significantly closer. The sounds around them turned into cries of fear and desperation as the crowd started to push against them, people realizing something was coming and that they needed to get out.

Tommy gasped as he was shoved forward by strange bodies. However, before he could panic a black wing wrapped around him, dragging the teen into the nearest store.

"You alright?" Phil asked, pulling him out of the doorway into the corner of the room.

Tommy nodded. "Is this a villain attack?" he asked nervously.

The question was answered by the sound of gunfire and screams echoing through the mall. Despite himself, Tommy flinched and Phil frowned, a dark look crossing his face.

"We should get away from the windows," he said, trying to lead Tommy further into the small clothing outlet. When Tommy hesitated to follow Phil gently placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sure the heroes will be here any minute, it's the middle of the day and the nearest agency is only a few blocks from here. The best we can do to help is to get somewhere safe and let them do their jobs."

Tommy had no idea how Phil could tell his hesitance was because he felt the urge to help but he was right. Even if Tommy were in any state to handle a fight at that moment, trying to jump into the fray would only serve to expose his nightly activities. He had had many discussions in the past about knowing his own limits and even on a good day this would be beyond them.

"Okay," he relented, following Phil further back into the racks of clothes.

They ended up situated in a place where they could still see the walkway outside the door. Sure enough not even two minutes later Tommy's eye caught a flash of blue as a brunette hero in white goggles sprinted past the shop. A moment later he saw a far more recognizable green half cloak and white mask following after.

Tommy had no idea what the nearest hero agency was but apparently, the Dream Team was here, if the distant flashes of flames were anything to go by. Tommy turned to Phil with a wide-eyed look and the man chuckled silently, mouthing 'I told you so' and earning a glare from the teen.

Not long after the sounds of gunfire and explosions began to peter out before vanishing entirely. A few minutes later the hero Thunderstrike appeared in the doorway of the shop.

“Everyone alright in here?” the hero asked, peaking around the store at all the hiding civilians. “Mall’s all clear, so we can start evacuating everyone calmly so nobody gets trampled.”

Tommy felt a gentle hand on his shoulder and for once didn’t jump, knowing who it was. “You alright, mate?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I’m good. Not my first villain attack.”

Phil frowned, “first after getting shot.”

Tommy managed a dark smirk. “Not my first time getting shot,” he countered.

The man sighed and shook his head. “Just as bad as Techno,” he muttered, pushing to his feet as Tommy snorted.

As they stood and started towards the door Thunderstrike looked at them and raised an eyebrow behind his red and blue sunglasses. “Nice day for a mall outing, ay?” he said to Phil.

Phil smiled, giving the hero a hardy pat on the shoulder as they passed, “Good luck with all the paperwork mate.”

“Oh joy,” the hero muttered as he moved further into the store to check if anyone was left behind.

Tommy snorted at the hero’s misfortune but couldn’t help giving Phil a curious look. “You know him?”

Phil’s wings twitched as he shifted the bags in his hands and offered the teen a small smile. “I used to do a lot of paperwork at a local hero agency,” he explained. “I taught Thunderstrike how to file reports when he was an intern a few years ago.”

“Oh. Cool.” Tommy had honestly forgotten that most of the people that staffed hero agencies were civilians. Though if Phil was some level of management at one of the bigger agencies it would definitely explain where all his money came from. Hero management was a highly specialized and important profession, so they usually got a fairly high cut of the agency's revenue.

Phil laughed, “It definitely doesn’t feel as cool as it sounds, the amount of legal responsibility that goes into keeping a hero agency running is quite something, so the paperwork and documentation are endless.”

Tommy hummed. “Yeah that does sound boring,” he agreed, making Phil laugh again.

They fell into a comfortable silence as they made their way out, following the direction of the police officers as everyone was evacuated.

Tommy found himself watching all the heroes out of instinct. He once again saw Dream and the rest of his team, Spectre, Firebrand and Ace all speaking to a familiar blue-haired detective. As though sensing his gaze the detective looked up and met Tommy's gaze, offering him a polite smile. Noticing movement the heroes all followed his line of sight, falling on them. Tommy looked away while Phil waved. At the door, he spotted a man wearing an orange ceramic fox mask and realized it must have been Vulpine's latest hero costume.

The relief he felt once they were out of the building and thus away from the heroes was short-lived as they turned the corner of the barricaded block towards the parking garage.

"Shit," Phil cursed, looking at the pile of rubble where the parking garage had once been.

Tommy couldn't help but snort because of course the car was destroyed, why wouldn't it be? "Isn't that nice," he said dryly.

His guardian sighed, setting down some of the bags and pulling out his phone. "We can either take the subway or wait until Wilbur or Techno are free enough to give us a ride," he said, still texting with his free hand.

"Let's just take the train," Tommy said almost immediately, "I just want to get out of here."

Phil nodded, "Fair enough. Train it is," he declared, turning to march in the direction of the nearest station.

Chapter End Notes

So I was looking back over the outline for this fic and I think I'm gonna have to make some changes for pacing purposes my own sanity. I've only got about one and a half chapters still prewritten so updates might start slowing down soon. Idk I've been in a funk lately but there will definitely be a chapter next Saturday, after that no promises for an update schedule.

Leave a kudos and a comment if you've made it this far, let me know how we're liking the pacing. Do we want more domestic stuff or more action? Is there already a pretty good balance?

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Tommy and Phil run into something on the way home.

Wilbur helps Tommy do laundry.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the late chapter! I ended up rewriting it from scratch because I wasn't happy with the first draft.

Um also this really blew up? Thank you everyone from TikTok for spreading the word?? Almost at 1000 kudos and over 15k hits??? Holy shit??? Heres the [Wilbur](#) and [Tommy](#) designs in celebration.

Also, everyone thank my wonderful new beta for how awesome this chapter is. Beta, I love you.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The nearest train station turned out to be a bust.

Obviously, they should have expected as much seeing as the parking garage collapse had destroyed most of the mall-goers cars as well as Phil's. Unfortunately, they made the foolish decision to follow the flow of foot traffic to the completely overrun subway station.

Phil sighed as they paused nearly half a block back from the dead stopped line spilling out of the subway stairwell. "Jesus Christ, at that rate it'll be hours before we make it back home."

Tommy frowned at the shifting mass of people, not feeling too keen on the idea of waiting around so many people.

"Any chance one of your wonderful children could pick us up?" he asked dryly.

Phil hummed, eyes straying to the backed-up traffic on the street next to them. "It's debatable if either of them would be awake right now," he groaned, running a hand back through his hair in frustration. "Besides I doubt that would be much faster with all the streets in the shopping district blocked off."

Tommy sighed, forcing his tired brain to wake back up and think of a solution. Normally in a situation like this, he would just throw up his hood and take to the rooftops in order to get home faster, but that wasn't going to work here. Even if Phil were willing to fly alongside him that didn't change the fact that they had a ton of bags to take along. And that he really wanted to avoid vigilante behaviour and its risks for the time being.

"We could... hmm," Tommy thought out loud. "We could go a couple stops up and hop on the train before the rest of the crowd?" he suggested.

The older man shot him an approving grin that absolutely did *not* spark a warm feeling in Tommy's chest. "That's not a bad idea mate. Good thinking," he said, quickly reaching out and casually ruffling Tommy's hair. Before he even had the chance to react the avian was already on the move, crossing the street to avoid the flow of people.

Tommy blinked in shock. He must have been way more tired than he thought if he didn't even react to Phil's raised hand. He shook his head and moved to follow.

Much to Tommy's surprise, Phil seemed to know exactly where he was going, even as they moved into a familiar lower-income residential neighbourhood. He deftly took every open alleyway and shortcut Tommy would have, which was weird. Only someone who was actually familiar with the area would know how to get around like that.

Eventually, he cracked, curiosity getting the better of him. "Spend a lot of time in the lower districts, Phil? Can't say I ever took you as the type."

The man snorted and shook his head. "Believe it or not I wasn't born into money," he replied easily. "So yeah, I used to spend a lot of time around here. Though I will admit it's been a while."

The teen frowned at that but held his tongue. His immediate reaction was one of distrust because he had rarely met a wealthy man that overcame poverty without some kind of skeleton in their closet. As much as he wanted to ask for clarification, he had also never met a foster parent that liked to talk about money or income with their resident leech, and he was not in the mood to find out if Phil wasn't as accommodating as he seemed. Today had been long and confusing enough.

God he hoped Phil's whole thing wasn't a facade. He was supposedly friends with Puffy and Niki, so the signs pointed to good things, but one could never be completely sure.

Sadly, despite himself, Tommy already liked Phil. He had taken a solemn vow not to get attached to any other families or kids he met in the system. But damn if this wouldn't be the first time anyway. Every other instance ended with heartbreak and he didn't want to think about what was going to happen here that would make him miserable next.

"You alright mate?" Phil asked after a bit, making Tommy curse himself internally. Of course, Phil could tell he was uncomfortable, he could practically read Tommy's mind back at the mall.

" 'm fine," he lied with a dull smile, "just tired."

The man offered him a skeptical look before glancing away as they turned the corner around the next block. Suddenly Phil stopped dead in his tracks, and Tommy nearly tripped over him.

The smaller man winced, apologizing as he helped the teen catch his balance. Instinctually Tommy nearly turned on him with a curse on his lips but the words died in his throat as he looked past him down the block.

“What—what the hell is that?” he managed after a moment, eyes glued to the scene ahead of them.

Phil frowned as he closed the last few steps towards the memorial, eyes landing on something out of Tommy’s line of sight. He made an odd expression before sighing. “It’s a memorial.”

Tommy forced himself to move forward. He almost didn’t want to know but he looked anyway. His gaze roamed over the crowded sidewalk, trying to take in everything he saw while also not absolutely losing his shit.

It was a memorial. For *him*.

The entire sidewalk in front of them was covered with candles, letters, blankets, teddy bears and other gifts and knick-knacks that spilled out over the edge of the curb. The chain-link fence that lined the alleyway between two buildings was covered with different coloured ribbons, painted padlocks and more pictures, drawings and letters. In the centre of the fence was a small painted banner that read *Our Hero, Theseus*.

Beside him, Phil shook his head slightly. “The media and heroes can complain about vigilantes all they want, you can’t deny that they have an impact on some people’s lives.”

Tommy made no attempt at a reply, still trying to process what he was looking at.

He of all people knew that vigilantes made a difference, that was his whole reason for becoming one. Heroes were too caught up in appearances and politics to help the people that needed it most, vigilantes were the ones that stopped muggers and saved lost kids at night, not the flashy heroes. Tommy knew that.

He also knew that when well-known vigilantes died there tended to be a reaction from the smaller communities that they worked with, Connor’s death had proven that. However, somehow Tommy had never considered that that kind of support would ever be directed at *him*.

Jesus just how many people had left their memorials here? There was too many to count.

“Tommy?”

The teen started but his eyes stayed firmly on the memorial. “I— just— just give me a second,” he managed breathlessly as the shopping bags slipped from his grip.

“Tommy?” Phil repeated, a hint of urgency in his voice now, “you alright, mate?”

“Yeah I just—” suddenly his whole body felt weak and his legs nearly gave out, making him sit down hard on the edge of the curb. Phil dropped his own shopping bags, hands coming up inches away from Tommy in an aborted attempt at steadying him.

“Tommy what’s wrong—”

“I just need a second,” the teen breathed, arms wrapping around his own stomach in an attempt to ground himself.

Phil crouched beside him and continued to talk, but Tommy heard none of it as he was hit with a sudden wave of *everything*.

Even after his panic attack the night before, it still hadn’t really hit him. He had been so caught up in his own mortality and self-hatred to realize how *much* he had been through over the last few weeks. Too caught up to really consider what had happened and what would happen now.

Maybe most of the world wouldn’t miss Tommy but a lot of people would miss Theseus. A lot of people *did* miss Theseus. As a vigilante Tommy had vowed to save people, to give them the help he never got. And God did he want to keep helping people, but how could he?

Tommy was broken. He put everything he had into helping people and if he kept on going he would die doing it. But how could he justify quitting while he was still alive? How many of these people would suffer because he was too selfish to get back up again and save them?

Theseus was dead but where did that leave Tommy? What was he supposed to do after everything?

He flinched when a hand suddenly grabbed him but didn’t dare pull away, most fosters didn’t like it when he resisted and made the punishment worse.

“Tommy, I want you to breathe with me, alright?” the voice said as his hand was moved until it rested against something warm. “Just follow my breathing, okay?”

The teen nearly choked trying to match his breathing with the rhythm under his hand. He heaved painfully every few seconds while Phil’s voice reminded him to follow along after each breath. He forced all other thoughts from his mind and latched onto Phil’s voice, realizing that having a panic attack in the street was probably not a good idea. Eventually, he managed a poor imitation of Phil’s breathing, still far more unsteady and weak.

“Sorry,” Tommy choked out after he caught his breath. “I’m sorry, I, um, I don’t know where that came from.” Aside from the fact that he was sitting next to his own memorial.

It didn’t make any sense. Yesterday he had been disappointed that he was alive and now he was what—scared seeing the fallout of his believed death? It was stupid, he should be able to know his own damn feelings without them sneaking up on him like this.

“No I’m sorry,” Phil said, making Tommy look at him in surprise. “I should’ve let you rest and settle in before going out like this, I just didn’t want to leave you alone all day.”

“Huh?” Tommy replied, face painted with confusion. How was any of this Phil’s fault? Tommy was just being stupid.

Phil gave him a sympathetic look. “Frankly you’ve been through a series of near-death experiences and traumatic events in a very short period of time. I can’t say I really know why, but it looks like this was just the straw that broke the camel’s back, and that’s not your fault. I’m just sorry that I dragged you through a few more bad experiences on top of it all.”

“Why are you doing this?” Tommy blurted before he could think it through.

Phil frowned at him. “Doing what?”

“All of this. Why– why are you putting up with me? Why did you even take me in? Am I some charity case to you? I just– I don’t *get* it. You’re rich, you have two of your own kids already yet you’re– you’re acting like you want to support me and don’t want anything in return. *What do you want from me ?*”

Some expression that Tommy couldn’t read crossed Phil’s face before it was replaced with a look of concern. “Tommy I don’t want anything *from* you–”

“Then what do you *want*?” he asked, tone pathetically close to desperate.

“I want *for* you to be happy Tommy,” Phil said earnestly.

“ *Why?* ” he nearly begged, not understanding what Phil was getting out of it. Everybody had an angle so why didn’t *he*.

“Because I know you can be, mate.” When all he received was a desperately confused look from Tommy he pressed on. “When I adopted Will and Techno, they were in situations kind of like yours. Both of them had been mistreated and hurt by every adult in their lives and nobody even gave them the time of day. I gave them a home because I knew that they were special kids and nobody else was willing to put in the effort to help them.

“Tommy I want you to be happy because I know it is possible, even if you don’t yet. I want to help you because you’re a great kid who deserves it, I don’t want anything from you in return, really.”

All Tommy could do was stare at him as his entire view of the situation shifted. “Wilbur and Techno are adopted?”

Phil blinked in surprise. “Clare didn’t tell you?”

Tommy just shook his head in reply as he processed the information. *That* was an answer that made sense in an odd way, but at the same time, it didn’t. Tommy had met people looking to adopt before, and while they were usually nicer than most nobody was perfect.

Phil’s kind heart and good intentions seemed like something out of a fairy tale to Tommy. But at the same time, it seemed like he had no choice but to start believing that it may be real. Tommy trusted Puffy and Niki, and if they were close friends with Phil then by default he couldn’t be that bad. But the fact that he had already adopted two hard cases out of the

kindness of his own heart? Just because he wanted to help some random kids get their happy ending? It was too good to be true but it made *sense*.

If there were ever a bleeding heart with the resolve to try and help Tommy, it would make total sense for them to be friends with Puffy and Niki. But how the fuck was this real. Why wasn't there a catch?

After that, they settled into an awkward silence. Phil gingerly pulled out his phone but made sure to shoot Tommy a concerned look every so often while typing. Tommy himself settled into staring blankly at the memorial behind them, trying to puzzle through all his racing thoughts and confusing emotions.

Phil hadn't looked even mildly annoyed with Tommy freaking or berating him with desperate rambling.

"What's the catch?" he finally broke through the silence. He couldn't deal with that uncertainty, he had enough to worry about with all his traumatic experiences and vigilante shit.

"There isn't a catch Tommy—"

"There's *always* a catch. Are you secretly a drug lord that tortures people for a living? Do you like to kick puppies for fun? Are you secretly a pro-hero that's going to get me killed when a villain wants revenge? There has to be a catch, Phil."

As he spoke he watched the man's reactions carefully and his heart sank in his chest when Phil tensed. There was a catch, he didn't know why he was disappointed when he knew there would be.

Phil seemed to debate what to say as he opened his mouth to speak and closed it again. Eventually, he sighed. "Okay, fine, there is a small catch. But I can't tell you yet."

Tommy groaned in frustration. "Phil!—"

"The keyword being *yet*, Tommy. If you decide you want to stick around, then I'll have no problem telling you. I promise it's nothing bad and it's nothing dangerous, not knowing will have no effect on how safe you are in my house."

"You said you were no bullshit—"

"And I also said sometimes I'd have to omit things to protect you," he countered. "We agreed trust is a two-way street. I can't tell you until *I* trust you completely. I'm not naive, we don't really know each other yet. Trust is something you have to give over time, and I'm willing to give you more and more of my trust as long as you are returning it, not breaking it. Sound fair?"

He couldn't help but glare slightly as he studied the man. "You promise it's not awful? I'm not gonna get kidnapped or have to call the cops on you once I know?"

Phil laughed weakly at that, "I promise you won't have to call the cops on me, it's not bad."

“And the getting kidnapped?”

The man made a concerningly honest look of consideration before he answered. “Well I am on the wealthy side, so that’s not a promise I can always make. I guess the other catch is that I’m rich and you’ll have to accept all the risks of that lifestyle.”

Tommy couldn’t help but laugh at that. “Oh nooo I’m so rich. What if someone kidnaps me for ransom?” he mocked in a silly voice before scoffing. “Get real problems, fuckin’ hell.”

That earned him a genuine snort from Phil. “You wanted to know what the catches were, that’s one of ‘em. If you’re that concerned about getting kidnapped you don’t have to stay with me.”

Tommy rolled his eyes, “I’m more likely to get stabbed or shot again if I go anywhere else, so I think I’ll take the risk.” Even if he wasn’t sure what his future in vigilantism was going to look like he wasn’t about to turn down a house where they didn’t hurt him on top of everything else.

Phil smiled gently at him and the teen stubbornly looked away. “Feeling any better?”

“About staying with you? Sure. About anything else? Not really, no.”

He huffed lightly at that.

“Well, one step at a time I suppose,” Phil muttered, turning back to look at his phone. “I texted Wilbur, he’s on his way to come to get us.”

Tommy hummed and went back to staring at the large collection of items in the memorial.

One step at a time seemed like a good expression right now. Maybe... well, no. The world was prepared to make do without Theseus for the foreseeable future, and maybe it would have to. Maybe once Tommy got his own confusing life dealt with, then the vigilante could make a daring return from the dead. But for now, one step at a time sounded like a good idea.

Once they got home Tommy retreated to his room, no longer in the mood to play social chess with any of the Watson’s.

He tried his best to get some school work done, but after only a couple of hours, the computer decided it was done working and shut down with half the battery left. Tommy really had the best luck today, didn’t he?

After wrestling with the device for a bit he finally had to pronounce the old brick dead and moved on to consider his options. Phil had said that he would be in his office working but that Tommy was welcome to bother him for anything. Tommy, however, was not too keen on the idea, though more out of habit than actual fear of the man. He was fairly certain Phil was as genuine as he seemed, but Tommy hadn’t been one to seek out attention or company from his guardians in a long time.

Though that habit did not apply to his foster siblings. For as much of a *day* as Tommy had, he was somehow still antsy and bored. Usually bothering foster siblings was a cure for boredom one way or another, but he wasn't sure if it was a risk he was willing to take with the newest set.

Thus far Tommy had determined that Techno was a socially awkward dickhead and Wilbur was an anxious prick. His limited interactions with the pink-haired man had resulted in awkward, stilted conversations and blunt statements that rubbed Tommy the wrong way.

His interactions with Wilbur seemed to consist of the man giving him concerned looks of pity before throwing a sarcastic quip his way that ended in trading verbal blows both times. Tommy really wasn't in the mood to bicker or find out if either found him annoying enough to resort to getting physical. Techno had a pretty nasty scar on his face so it was safe to assume he probably knew his way around in a fight.

That left him with what was in his new room. A few bags of brand new clothes and bedding that needed to get washed and some annoyingly arranged furniture. He would have to make do, Tommy had pretty much run out of his tolerance for sitting and thinking about his life for today.

So he rearranged the furniture.

Normally he wouldn't dare make such a bold statement so early on in a new placement, but maybe he wanted to push it. Phil said he wanted Tommy to be happy, that he would let him stay. If that was really true then he should have no problem with Tommy arranging the room how he liked.

Besides, who the hell put the head of the bed on the same wall as the door? That was stupid and wrong. Ideally, a bed belonged in a corner with one side against the wall and the foot facing the door, so Tommy made it happen.

The bed was moved to the back wall while the small desk took its place on the door-side of the room. While having his back to the windows at the desk wasn't ideal, it made it so he could see both the door and windows from the bed, which was honestly more important, as it would ease his general paranoia.

Next, he spent a little more time than necessary deciding where the mostly empty bookshelves and dressers should be arranged. He tried every possible combination and finally settled for the bookshelves next to the bed and desk with the dresser on the opposite side of the room.

After he did that he unpacked all his clothes and tried them on, finding the rare few items that didn't fit and setting them aside with their tags intact. He removed all the tags on everything else and started to organize them into laundry piles.

At some point, there was a knock on the door before Techno's deep voice droned through it.

"Your lunch is out here," he announced before leaving with heavy footsteps. Tommy waited a full five minutes before cracking the door open. On the floor in front of the door was a plate

with a bowl of tomato soup and a grilled cheese cut into quarters. He sighed, retrieving the food and sitting in the middle of the tornado of a mess to eat it.

Eventually, as the sky began to glow with the golden hour sun, Tommy accepted the fact that his laundry needed to be done. Which meant asking for help.

Logically he knew he could ask Phil and the man would most likely help him with no issue, but the stubborn part of Tommy still insisted that he shouldn't impose any more than necessary. Why bother the man while he was working when there were two other people that knew how to use the laundry machines?

Just as he was considering which of the brothers he felt more up to dealing with he heard the soft strumming of a guitar coming from the next room over. At first, he thought it might have been Wilbur playing music obnoxiously loud just to annoy him, but he realized he was wrong when the music hit a wrong note before stopping. The tune repeated a few times, sometimes hitting the same wrong string and sometimes not.

Wilbur was playing the guitar. And he was actually pretty good.

A very small part of Tommy started to feel guilty for insulting the man's musical talents when they were bickering earlier. A much bigger part of Tommy hated that he was wrong and said that he should go insult him again.

He ignored both voices and resolved to go ask Wilbur when he was done practicing. It definitely wasn't because Tommy wanted to listen for a bit, it wasn't like he found the faint sound of music calming, not at all. He just wanted to put off dealing with the man for as long as possible.

After a while, the consistent sounds of music and quiet singing slowed down to lazy plucking at the instruments strings and occasional humming. Tommy sighed, standing and quietly venturing into the hall to stand in front of Wilbur's door, trying to work up any kind of nerve to knock.

"It's open," Wilbur called through the door after Tommy stood there for too long. He grimaced and turned the door handle to push inside.

Wilbur looked up from his place leaning against his bed as Tommy hovered in the doorway. He smiled almost teasingly. "What's up gremlin?"

Tommy glared at him. "Well, I was going to ask for help with laundry but I can see you still just feel like being an ass so I'll just go."

Wilbur laughed, unphased. "I didn't even do anything!" he protested.

Tommy looked him up and down, frowning. "Your stupid face does plenty," he shot back.

Wilbur scoffed, rolling his eyes as he placed his guitar on the bed behind him. He looked back at Tommy with a flat expression. "Do you want help or not?"

“Honestly?” Tommy raised an eyebrow, “Not. But I want to keep wearing your stupid sweater even less,” he said, tugging at the grey collar for emphasis.

Wilbur rolled his eyes. “That sweater is probably more fashionable than anything you bought today, but I would like it back sooner than later.”

“Well then, we seem to have a solution to our mutual problems,” Tommy muttered before turning back out into the hall. He moved back to his room to grab the overflowing laundry basket and returned to meet Wilbur’s amused look with another glare.

“Laundry’s on the bottom floor,” the man said jerking his head to the elevator at the end of the hall as the door silently slid open.

Tommy only grunted in reply as he shoved past him and dropped the basket on the floor of the lift. To the teen’s surprise, the man seemed yet again unphased yet made no snarky comment, letting them settle into a tense silence.

The trip was short and simple. The lift stopped on the first floor of the house and they got off, Wilbur turning right and leading them into a small laundry room that had a front loading washer and dryer set stacked against the left wall. It was hardly surprising, for as obviously new and expensive as the townhouse was, it was still fairly small.

Quickly Wilbur showed him how the machines worked and gave his recommended settings for washing bigger loads. After a bit of debating, they agreed it would probably work best to just split Tommy’s laundry into two loads. Wilbur insisted on helping him organize the darks and lights despite Tommy arguing he could do it himself.

“Oh shit,” Wilbur said as Tommy put his first load into the washer.

“What?” he grumbled.

Wilbur smiled sheepishly at the teen’s blunt tone. “Well, the thing is, I meant to wash this sweater with my last load, but I was wearing it and forgot... can I just throw it in with your stuff?”

Tommy stared at him blankly just long enough to make the man squirm. He snorted. “Fine, I’m not that petty.”

He chuckled at that. “Thanks, Toms,” he replied, reaching for the hem to shuck off the sweater.

As he pulled the sweater over his head it ended up pulling his shirt halfway with it and Tommy blinked in shock. The first surprise was that Wilbur was weirdly buff under the layers of crew neck and button-up. The second was the awful scars across his stomach and ribs. Even as he righted his shirt and threw the sweater in the washer Tommy could spot more scars visible on his arms and—

A collection of very faint white lines across both his wrists.

Tommy resisted the urge to grimace. He remembered Phil saying that he adopted Wilbur and Techno from 'situations like his', but he had assumed Phil was exaggerating to a degree. Every foster kid had some sort of shit time but Tommy really was a special case in that department.

From the looks of it, Wilbur was a special case as well.

"What?" Wilbur asked in a confused tone when he caught Tommy staring.

Tommy swallowed the metallic taste in his mouth, cursing himself as he spoke. He really shouldn't push it but he- he wanted to know. "Can I ask you a really insensitive question?"

Wilbur frowned at him. "If you know it's insensitive then why do you want to ask?"

"Cause- cause it's kinda important, I think," Tommy stuttered. "It's just- you know what, never mind. It's stupid."

"Hey, hey, hey," Wilbur protested as the teen moved to start the washer. "None of that, if you think it's important then it probably is. Plus now I'm curious. So just ask."

Tommy paused, looking back at him again as his gaze flicked to the man's wrists. Wilbur caught the movement this time, expression hardening slightly as he crossed his arms and hid the scars from sight.

"I just... how actually shitty was your childhood before Phil adopted you?" he asked, grimacing at how stupid the question sounded out loud. "Because, well, depending on how shitty it really was, you um- well, you might be able to answer some other questions that I don't think anybody else would really... get. If that makes sense."

The laundry room was awkwardly tense as Wilbur studied Tommy with a slight frown. Despite himself, Tommy relented quickly, looking away to finish starting the laundry. When he turned back the man gave him one final searching look before he sighed, running a hand through his hair nervously.

"Well, it was pretty fuckin' shit if you ask me. Though I'm not sure what your definition of *actually shitty*" is."

"Has anyone... have you had a lot of near-death experiences?"

Wilbur frowned, suddenly seeming to find interest in the tile floors under his feet. "I don't really want to get into it but the first time I met Phil I was in the hospital. My powers were pretty dangerous and hard to control when I was younger. Foster parents hated me and when a couple of gangs caught wind of my existence they nearly got me killed fighting over who got to kidnap me. Happened more than once too, so yeah, one or two."

Tommy stared at the man for what was probably an uncomfortable amount of time, but he waited patiently for Tommy to speak.

It was uncanny how easily that could have been Tommy's childhood. If his powers had been registered before his parents dumped him, if every foster parent knew he was the reason their

powers sometimes didn't work for a second, if they realized he was fighting back with his powers it would have been a nightmare. Not to mention what a villain would want to do with a power that could cancel out other powers.

And even then their stories were still painfully similar. A "powerless" kid and a kid with what was probably a 'villain' level power got pretty similar treatment in the system. Everyone hated them and blamed them for every little problem. That and everyone always seemed to want to kill them, hence all the scars that both he and Wilbur sported to this day.

The teen looked away as his mouth ran on without him, "Did you ever just wish it would all end?"

Wilbur was silent for a moment but Tommy was turned away from him and unable to gauge his reaction. "What do you mean by that Tommy?"

"You know what I mean," he nearly whispered, still refusing to look at the other.

Wilbur's next breath was audibly shaky. "I think I know what you mean, but you're going to have to say it, Tommy," he replied firmly.

He groaned in exasperation, already tired of the conversation he wanted the answers from. "I mean did you ever wish you were dead, Wilbur. Okay?"

"Why do you want to know, Tommy? Where are you going with this?"

"I just!" he cut himself off, lowering his voice as he continued. "I want to know how you got over it. How could you go from living such a shitty life to- to all this," he gestured out towards the movie room with its huge couches and projector TV, "and just adjust. If your childhood was anything like mine then how the hell are you so normal, how did you-," his voice cracked slightly, despite his best efforts to keep calm, "-just how?"

"Tommy, can you look at me?" Wilbur said in a painfully gentle tone after a moment.

He grit his teeth and shook his head stubbornly. "You know what- forget it, I don't- I don't want to talk about this-"

"*Tommy*," he repeated, voice tinged with urgency. "Please just- just look at me?"

Tommy tensed more when he heard the man's voice waver slightly. How big of a dickhead was Tommy being? Dragging up Wilbur's old shit only to get scared off and try to leave the other hanging without an explanation.

He slowly turned back to Wilbur, taking in the others' tense form and shaking hands with a twinge of guilt.

Wilbur sighed shakily when Tommy met his gaze. "Look, you don't have to say anything if you don't want to, but I need you to listen, okay?"

Tommy only hesitated for a moment before nodding. He just wanted this over with already.

“Okay,” Wilbur breathed, pushing his glasses up before scrubbing a hand over his face. He sighed again. “The answer to your question is that that feeling isn’t something that you just get over. Usually, wishing you were dead or wanting to die is a symptom of a bigger problem. My problem was severe, undiagnosed depression. If you’re feeling like that, and I wouldn’t be surprised given that you also had a shitty childhood, you’re probably dealing with something along those lines. Have you been having thoughts or feelings like that recently?”

Tommy couldn’t help but roll his eyes. He had started this conversation hoping to get some advice, not psychoanalysis. But he was also slightly curious if this would end up somewhere helpful so he nodded.

“Okay, thank you for telling me. I know we don’t know each other that well so it means a lot that you’re willing to trust me with that. Do you want my advice or are you desperate to escape this conversation right now?”

In all honesty, Tommy did want to escape, but Wilbur’s words reminded him of Phil’s little speech about trust and found himself hesitating.

“Can your advice be summed up with the word therapy?” he asked warily.

Wilbur grimaced slightly. “Not completely?”

Trust had to be given over time, apparently. Tommy had already put way too much trust in Wilbur with this conversation, but what the hell he may as well commit. “Fine,” he grumbled, leaning back against the wall behind him.

“Okay, well then... you asked how I moved in here and just adjusted, but I didn’t. I didn’t adjust, I lived here for years after Phil adopted me and still periodically felt like shit. Honestly, I still do sometimes. But in all reality, and you’re going to hate this, I felt like shit way more often before I started therapy.”

Tommy groaned at that but Wilbur only laughed weakly, turning to lean back against the wall beside him.

“I know, I know. I had seen some less than helpful therapists before then and sworn them off as a result. But once you wake up in the hospital at sixteen because you lost too much blood from cutting too deep, nobody really wants to take the chance again.”

“Jesus- I’m not... I don’t cut myself. I’m sorry you went through that but it’s not that bad for me.”

“Okay, so throwing yourself at someone that’s holding a gun is less dangerous?”

Tommy glared at the wall across from them. “Who the hell even told you that?”

“Just a guess,” Wilbur said evenly.

Tommy turned the glare on him, “If I was actually trying to get myself killed in a situation involving a gun, I would be dead.”

“Are you saying you wouldn’t at least consider getting yourself shot if you were in that situation again?” Wilbur asked, expression completely serious as he turned to meet Tommy’s eyes.

He had no dignified answer for that so he quickly went back to glaring at the wall.

“Look, I’m not you. I don’t know what’s going through your head, so I don’t know exactly what to tell you. But it’s pretty obvious that you and I have a lot in common and as someone who has been through a lot of similar shit as you I can confidently say that this isn’t the kind of thing that just goes away.

“I know that the T-word is big and scary, so that’s not my advice for you right now,” he continued. “My advice for right *now*, as in the next few weeks and *maybe* months, is to just try your best to settle in. The only thing you need to worry about now is getting comfortable enough with us to tell Phil that you’re struggling, that’s it. Don’t worry about therapy, don’t worry about the distant future, just worry about that goal. Sounds fair?”

Tommy blinked in surprise, looking over at Wilbur. “You’re not going to tell Phil?”

Wilbur gave him a soft look that Tommy forced himself to ignore. “I’ll only tell Phil if I think you’re a danger to yourself or others. For now, I think you’re good enough, considering you didn’t run *towards* the gunfire at the mall. And maybe there’s going to be some days that are shittier than others but you still don’t want to tell him. In that case, you’re always more than welcome to come talk to me, okay?”

Tommy stared at him for a moment longer before sighing and tipping his head back against the wall. “God I fuckin’ hate you, people,” he grumbled.

Wilbur chuckled at that, “Any particular reason?”

“You’re all so fuckin’ nice and it’s fuckin’ weird and confusing. I hate it.”

He could hear the smile in Wilbur’s voice as he spoke, “Yeah, we kinda are, huh? Don’t stress about it too much, kid, that *is* something that you’ll eventually get used to.”

“I’m not a fuckin’ kid you lanky bastard,” he muttered, swatting Wilbur’s shoulder half-heartedly as he pushed off the wall.

“And I’m not a bastard you little gremlin,” Wilbur shot back with a swat to Tommy’s shoulder as he shoved past him in the doorway. Tommy laughed lightly and followed after as Wilbur passed the lift and headed for the stairs.

It would be a little hard to actively hate Wilbur now, but maybe that wasn’t the worst thing in the world. Tommy had always preferred placements where he and the other kids could tolerate each other. He wouldn’t mind some bickering and bullying as long as he knew that at the end of the day Wilbur was in his corner.

“Let’s go find Techno,” Wilbur suggested excitedly like they hadn’t just had a very heavy conversation. “I bet if we pester him enough he’ll make us dinner.”

He grinned weakly at the idea. “Poke the sleeping bear much?”

“Oh, boo. Techno’s not that scary once you get to know him, he’s a giant *teddy* bear on the inside.”

“Nothing about that man screams ‘I’m a teddy bear inside’,” Tommy said dryly.

Wilbur laughed and turned to look at him with a mischievous grin, “Well, I guess you’ll just have to stick around and find out, won’t you?”

Tommy resisted the urge to smile at the idea. He knew it was horribly naive of him to hope so, but maybe he could let himself believe that this one would work out. He could let himself enjoy the fantasy while it lasted.

Chapter End Notes

Okay! So some housekeeping I guess.

I've seen everybody's wonderful comments everywhere and have come to the decision that I'm aiming for quality with this fic from now on. Unfortunately, this is probably going to mean slower updates as I have caught up with all of my pre-written material. But on the bright side, it means that I'm not gonna half-ass this anymore. So it's just gonna be a little more work for a higher quality story.

I will also be continuing the series of character designs on my [Tumblr](#) and [TikTok](#) so feel free to check them out and give it some love.

Finally thank you all so much for all the love and support for this project, I wasn't really expecting so much attention but I will not disappoint. I really want to see this through to the end with my best effort so just bear with me if you're invested.

You guys are awesome.

- Blue

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

The Blade has a strange encounter.

Phil gets a warning.

Tommy and Wilbur bicker.

Chapter Notes

Surprise! A random chapter in the middle of the week!

I got whacked with the writing stick last week so the next few chapters are all part of the next mini-arc I guess.

As always everybody thank my wonderful beta and enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno was about ready to kill someone.

For anyone that didn't know the young man they would probably take that phrase as an exaggeration of his frustration. For anyone that *did* know him, they would probably be immediately concerned. Techno had spent all of his teen years and adult life learning to control those thoughts and channel them into healthier things. This meant that most days Techno would also be concerned about having the urge to kill someone, but not at the moment.

He *really* wanted to kill someone. Multiple someones if he got his hands on them.

It had been a full month since he signed onto Vulpine's case hunting the Death Totems gang and everything was going to shit.

The first problem they encountered was that they couldn't get any information on the gang because suddenly all the members they arrested started taking poison capsules and killing themselves the second they were left unattended in lockup. According to Vulpine and Dream this was a new phenomenon, and a very annoying one in Techno's opinion.

The second problem that they encountered a few weeks later was they suddenly couldn't manage to get a hold of any of the gang members to try and switch up tactics. Every time

they had a Death Totem member cornered they would pull out a syringe and shoot up some drug that increased even the shittiest of powers beyond what one hero could handle alone. This meant that every fight ended with the gangster escaping, collapsing braindead from the drug, or being carted off to a hospital with life threatening injuries or side effects. It was exhausting and infuriating.

Dream said the drug's street name was *Trigger* and that the Death Totems weren't the only ones using it recently.. A few days later Vulpine was suddenly swamped after being placed in charge of the Trigger case as well. And with their chief investigator so busy it became even harder to get anything done.

The third problem was more of a personal one on Techno's part, but still a problem nonetheless. At one point Vulpine had said that Styx had ties to the rogue Foolish Gae'meers, and with all their options quickly starting to dry up or kill themselves, The Blade decided to take matters into his own hands. He had spent the last two weeks trying to hunt down the rogue with very slim results. The only thing he had managed to gather was that Foolish knew Techno was after him, and that the rogue was toying with him.

Case and point, the abandoned subway tunnel walls in front of The Blade that were spray painted in red. All the graffiti said the same thing in every language Techno could read, plus plenty more he couldn't. He stopped at the largest one written in English and rested a hand against the hilt of his sword.

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BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD

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If Foolish couldn't give him the information he needed, Techno was going to straight up murder him. If he knew enough about Techno to tease him with the name *Blood God* then he was practically begging for it. The people that knew any specifics about Techno's relation to that death cult fell into four categories: dead, in jail, retired law enforcement or his family.

If the rogue had the audacity to dig up Techno's identity and shove his past in his face for laughs, then he shouldn't be surprised to meet the business end of The Blade's sword.

He stared at the red murals for a moment longer before he began to scan his surroundings and consider what to do next.

By all means he should take photos for evidence and bring them back to Vulpine's agency to write a report on. However, he hadn't done that for any of his other encounters with the rogue, because nobody knew he was hunting him on his own. Plus even if he had been on the books for this, he wouldn't take in proof that his target knew his identity. More because he didn't want to explain it than worrying about being kicked from the case.

This sucked. All of it. First Theseus was stupid enough to go and get himself killed and somehow that led to Techno secretly tracking down a rogue that wanted nothing more than to egg him on.

What was he even doing? He wasn't an investigator, his job was to be big and flashy and sell superhero merch. He was a distraction for the public so real heroes like Whisper, Vulpine and The Warden could get shit done when nobody was watching. Why was he putting in so much effort to avenge a dead kid who never did anything but sucker punch him and run when he tried to talk?

How had Techno gone from hating everything to do with being a hero to actively going out of his way and above his required paygrade? He was only ever a hero by legal mandate yet here he was, risking his job and freedom to try and take down a villain.

Actually, on second thought, it made a little more sense than he was willing to admit. The reason he was doing this wasn't because he wanted to be a hero. He wanted revenge. Hence why he had unconsciously gone off the books. This way he could kill someone and it would give him the satisfaction of the blood on his hands over the very likely temporary suspension of his license to keep him in line.

Damn he wanted to kill that rogue right about now. If Foolish wanted blood for the Blood God he was going to have to give his own.

As it stood, taking any evidence was out of the picture, but so was leaving the evidence. If someone stumbled across this and recognized that it had anything to do with the cult that raised Techno, he could guess the first person they would go to consult with.

"Trying to figure out how to get rid of the paint without a pressure washer?" a voice said from the darkness behind Techno.

The hero drew his sword, whirling towards the sound. His flashlight landed on the figure of a tired young man in a grey patchwork sweatshirt. The man squinted and brought up a hand to shield his eyes from the light.

He grinned at The Blade. "I can help you get rid of it but I'd rather have a little chat first."

The hero frowned at him. He was being awfully calm for someone wandering around in the dark who just ran into the number one hero. "Who are you?"

"Oh! My name's Karl," he replied, angling his body away from the light. "Would you mind not blinding me? It kinda hurts my eyes."

Techno considered for a moment before slowly lowering the light. His grip tightened on his sword hilt. "I'm not really in the mood for chatting actually. You said you can cover it up?"

Karl tilted his head curiously. "Well, I can help get rid of it. But the price is just a quick talk, if that's alright?"

Techno's eyes narrowed. This was probably a setup, but if he wanted to cover up the writing it was his best bet. He knew what Foolish looked like and he definitely didn't look like a fluffy haired tunnel ghost. The grey sweatshirt mixed with his pale complexion and the sneaking around abandoned subway lines was a bit creepy.

"Fine," he relented after a moment. "Talk."

Karl smiled nervously and rubbed the back of his neck. "Okay, well... okay. There's no easy way to explain this but I helped Foolish figure out who you are. Neither of us are going to tell anyone or use it to put you in danger," he quickly added as Techno brought his blade into a ready position.

"If you're so respectful about identities then why bother looking into me?" he asked, voice far more even than the growing rage in his chest.

"Foolish was pretty sure you were the current incarnation of the Blood God, but he wanted to be sure," he said like it was a logical explanation. "He's generally had a pretty good relationship with your predecessors and thought it might be interesting."

Techno snorted. "So what, you're both cultists? That's unfortunate, I generally held rogues in higher regard than that."

Karl frowned at him, his grey eyes glinting oddly in the low light. "You'd be surprised how many cults like that were founded on truth," he said. "Your cult may have had some strange and barbaric practices, but they had one thing right."

He glared at the man and only received a blank look back. Obviously Karl believed what he was saying, yet he implied that he wasn't part of the same cult that taught those beliefs. "Are you saying that you believe magic goes beyond the science of potions and enchanting? That you believe in gods and reincarnation?"

Karl gave him a sad smile. "The world is so much bigger and more complex than most people have been led to believe. Though most of them can go on with their lives like that. I can't say that it'll be easy for you, trying to deny what you are."

"Well tough," Techno shot back. "My life, my problem. Is there a different point to this conversation or can we be done now?" He did not want to have this conversation with some dead-eyed rogue he'd never met before, much less with anyone for that matter.

The man blinked and nodded. "Right, yeah. Um, well I just wanted to warn you that I know who you are, which is why I know your dad is fostering a kid named Tommy Innit, right?"

And that's where Techno drew the line.

Without warning he surged forward and grabbed the rogues' hoodie, slamming him into the wall none too gently. Karl grunted as he bounced off of the concrete and crashed to the floor. He gingerly rolled onto his back and attempted to sit up, only to be met with a netherite sword against his throat.

Wilbur and Phil were obviously head over heels for that kid and Techno was not about to let some creepy ass rogues pull him into any weird shit. Even if he had only talked to the kid a total of four times he knew it would break his brother and father's hearts if anything happened to him. Techno's relationship or lack thereof meant nothing.

"Choose your next words very carefully," he told Karl, "or this tunnel is about to get a lot more red."

Karl visibly swallowed as he laid back against the dusty floor and raised his hands in surrender. "I am the one that saved him from his last foster parents and the gang after him," the rogue said slowly. "I was just going to explain who's after him and why you need to keep an eye on him, okay?"

Techno had to resist the urge to laugh. A gang after one of Phil's foster kids? Very original. Great. Fantastic.

"There's a gang after him?"

"Mhmm," Karl hummed. "I don't really know the specifics, but I think it might be Minx or J. Schlatt. But they're not the real problem right now."

Techno sighed. Great, so Tommy was a special kind of trouble magnet. "How exactly is gangsters trying to kill him not a real problem?"

"They're not trying to kill him, they're trying to kidnap him," Karl replied, which was very much so *not* what Techno wanted to hear. "My powers allow me to alter the flow of time and travel through it when I use the right kind of magic. And somewhere down the line, someone kidnaps Tommy Innit and it causes such a huge problem in the city that a different threat goes completely unnoticed until it's too late."

"Listen man, you're going to have to start giving me specifics or I'm just going to get bored and kill you," he threatened. "I've been having a bad week because of you and your dumb rogue buddies messing with my case." He pressed the sword even closer for emphasis.

"Okay, okay! I don't know why they're after Tommy or what happens but I know that so far it's been avoided. The night I saved him was the night they should have taken him. What I *do* know is that the other threat is simply called "*The Egg*" and that there's still time to deal with it. Okay?"

Techno stared at him. "Seriously this is your last chance, because that explains literally nothing."

"The Egg is some sort of demon or magic thing that is growing under the city. It controls people's minds and is, like, carnivorous. Eventually it takes over the whole overworld and

kills every living thing that's left. So, uh, long story short, keep Tommy from getting kidnaped and try to get heroes to look into the egg thing before it's strong enough to take over the whole city."

The tunnel was painfully silent for a long moment.

"You said that with so much conviction that you're either telling the truth or you're the most delusional person I have ever met," Techno said eventually, removing the blade from the man's neck. "I assume we're done here?"

Karl sighed in relief and nodded as he sat up. "I'm sorry I can't give you more."

The hero studied him for a moment before he shrugged. "I can't say I'm taking it at face value, but I do appreciate the warning about the kid. I'll look into it but if I don't find anything I'm going to assume you were some crazy person that ambushed me in the abandoned subway network."

Karl laughed at that. "That's fair I guess." He pushed to his feet and attempted to dust off his pants in vain. "Now how about all this paint, huh?"

Techno hummed and stepped back as the smaller man moved to stand in the centre of the tunnel. He watched curiously as Karl activated his powers. A strangely colourful aura gathered around him, shifting and fracturing like a kaleidoscope as the grey of his hoodie began to shift with it.

He watched as the paint on the walls around them took on a slight shimmer before they began to erase themselves in the same order they had been written. All the red words moving backwards as time reversed them out of existence, leaving behind the same dirty walls as blank as they had been before. Not a single trace remained aside from the crushed spray paint can next to the wall.

It was both extremely interesting and mildly terrifying to watch. He had a power that by no means would the government ever allow someone to use for their own interests. He could use it to topple empires or discover every secret that had ever been written, yet here he was, using it to undo graffiti.

Techno's traitorous mind wandered to other powers of such a calibre, making him scowl at the rogue. He wasn't about to let this strange guy's ideas about magic influence his own thoughts. Magic was just science. It was just potions and enchanting, *not* time travel and reincarnated gods.

Once the walls were free of the taunting words Karl turned back around. He looked significantly more tired than before and Techno noticed that the dark and light colours of his hoodie were now inverted. Weird.

Well, the evidence of his corroborating with rogues was gone, so his business here was done.

"Oh! And one last thing," Karl said as the hero turned to leave.

“What?” he grunted. He really didn’t want to have to try and decode another vague message.

“Foolish said he’s willing to meet you now,” the rogue informed him. “He said you’ve been a good sport and wanted me to make the final confirmation that you actually are the Blood God.”

Techno clenched his jaw in an attempt to stamp down his rage. Even if he didn’t kill the other rogue he really, *really* wanted to stab him. The conceited bastard had the audacity to fuck around with him for the last two weeks then simply *invite* Techno to a meeting.

“That’s fantastic,” he said in the most monotone voice possible. “Any specifics or do I have to chase him down myself?”

Karl reached into his front hoodie pocket and pulled out a slightly crumpled letter. Techno closed the last few steps between them and snatched it from Karl’s hand.

“Great. Hopefully we never see each other again,” he said as he turned to walk in the direction he had come from.

“Have a good night Techno!” Karl called after him cheerfully.

Techno sighed and walked faster. Hopefully Karl hadn’t been lying about him and Foolish being respectful of his identity. It would not be great if suddenly rogues and villains all over the city started calling him by his first name.

Once he was sure he was far enough away from the strange man Techno sighed and sheathed his sword. At least tonight hadn’t been a total loss seeing as he managed to get a meeting with the one person who could help them find Styx. Sadly he also found an entirely new pile of problems.

A gang was after Tommy, except they had no idea which gang or why. Apparently it would cause a very big and distracting problem if they caught him, but they didn’t know what it was. So that was fantastic. Did the kid even know? Would he tell them if he did? Probably not.

That and there may or may not be some weird demon under the city that could destroy the world or something. He was less worried about the validity of that statement but felt at least a little bit of an obligation to check it out. Karl *had* saved Tommy’s life and helped him destroy evidence, so he owed him at least enough to entertain the idea that it might be based in truth.

Hopefully both of those things could wait for just a little bit longer. He would warn Phil about the Tommy problem and tell someone about “the egg” thing but make it sound less crazy. Maybe Puffy or Sam could take on the case, Fundy had more than enough open investigations without some magical goose chase to worry about.

Techno looked at the letter in his hand and decided he would open it later when he knew he was in a secure location. He still kind of wanted to kill somebody but the success of getting in contact with his target was good enough for now. Maybe he could hold off until he found Styx, or maybe the bloodlust would fade like it normally did.

But for now, The Blade had some work to get to.

“Okay, but are you absolutely *sure* that’s the case,” Phil asked his son again.

Techno raised an eyebrow. “As sure as someone can be when they have no hard evidence and got their information from a rogue,” he replied coolly. “Is your memory that bad? We just went over this.”

Phil blinked. “What? No, shut up. It’s just if there really is a gang after him—” he cut himself off as the sound of bickering in the stairwell grew louder.

“Tommy Innit! You get back here you little gremlin!” came Wilbur’s shout, muffled by the distance.

The shouting was quickly followed by the much closer sound of laughter and light feet sprinting through the foyer and sitting room. Tommy soon came into view and the boy's eyes locked on Techno with a mischievously gleeful look.

He ran right up to Techno without a moment's hesitation and leaned over to whisper something in the young man’s ear. Techno tilted his head before rolling his eyes. He seemed to snatch something from Tommy’s hand just as Wilbur came into view. He gave Tommy a look that was somewhere between playful and murderous.

“Give me my phone back you little shit,” he huffed as he stalked into the kitchen.

Tommy grinned at him. “I don’t have your phone,” he retorted, slowly edging towards the dining room.

He shot Phil a somewhat wary look and Phil found himself smiling and winking.

If Techno and Wilbur had pulled this at that age they definitely would have got an earful for causing trouble on purpose. However, this was Tommy, who in Phil’s opinion, had a little bit of lost childhood to make up for. He was starting to get bolder in his antics but so far everything had been harmless and he gave up quickly when asked, so Phil would let it slide. He wasn’t about to go around stomping on Tommy’s fun.

“You literally stole it from my hand like thirty seconds ago,” Wilbur shot back. “Now give it back to me or else.”

Tommy laughed, “Or else what? You’ll take me down? You don’t look like you’ve been in a fight since you were twelve, I’ll kick your ass, bitch.”

“Ohhhh, thems is fightin’ words Toms,” Wilbur grinned. “Last chance, phone or utter embarrassment when I make you like a toddler in karate class.”

Tommy scoffed, “Good luck with that you lanky ass bitch—”

Wilbur cut him off with a playful yell as he telegraphed his lunge, which Tommy gracefully dodged. The teen sprinted back into the dining room with Wilbur hot on his tail.

Phil looked back at Techno, who sat watching in amusement as his brother failed miserably to corner the boy.

“Seriously Techno?”

Techno shot him a weak glare. “How is this *my* fault,” he asked. “When Will and I did that to each other you would ground us before we could even start arguing. If anything you’re the one egging him on now.”

Phil rolled his eyes as Tommy managed to get around Wilbur and sprint back into the sitting room. “If picking on Wilbur is what makes him more comfortable right now, I’ll allow it. But that doesn’t mean you have to help him.”

Techno shrugged, turning to watch as Wilbur chased after Tommy only to get nailed in the face with a decorative couch pillow the second he rounded the corner. “I’m making him more comfortable by letting him know he can trust me,” he argued.

Phil sighed and leaned around the island to watch as Wilbur tackled Tommy onto the couch, kicking aside the coffee table in the process.

Tommy burst out laughing as Wilbur tried to hunt through his pockets. “I *told you* I don’t have it!” he cried between laughs.

Wilbur sat back with a mild look of frustration on his face. “Then where the hell did you put —” he yelped as Tommy took advantage of his distraction and shoved him to the floor.

Tommy quickly jumped on top of him, another decorative pillow in hand. “Too bad you’ll never get to find out!” he shouted, slamming the pillow into Wilbur’s face and holding it there in a mock attempt at suffocation.

Wilbur struggled weakly before deciding he had enough. He waited until Tommy’s centre of gravity was too high off his chest and arched upwards, sending the teen over his head and onto the floor. Tommy abandoned his pillow as the two began to grapple for control, using an interesting mix of wrestling and jiu-jitsu moves to try and get the advantage. Somehow Tommy gained the upper hand as he managed to get Wilbur’s head and right arm in a half headlock and pinned him on his back on the floor.

Phil’s face morphed into an expression of surprise. At the very least if there *was* a gang after Tommy he seemed to know a bit about self-defence. He shook his head.

“Go break it up and give him his phone back,” he told Techno with a fond smile.

Techno rolled his eyes and stood, revealing Wilbur’s phone that had been hidden in his hands since he took it from Tommy. He made his way into the next room and gently tapped Tommy’s shoulder, telling him to let go. When Tommy sat up he noticed the phone in the hand behind Techno’s back and tried to snatch it back only to be shook off.

“Congratulations,” Techno rumbled as he pulled his brother to his feet, “you just got your ass kicked by a toddler.”

Tommy shot to his feet immediately. “I’m not a fucking *toddler* you dick!” he protested loudly, making Wilbur laugh.

While Wilbur was distracted picking on Tommy, Techno discreetly slipped the phone back into Wilbur’s own pocket. Phil snorted at his son’s antics, knowing where this was heading.

“Alright brat, now give me my phone back,” Wilbur demanded.

“I don’t have it,” Tommy grumbled, still miffed after being called a child. “I gave it to Techno when I ran into the kitchen.”

Wilbur turned a glare on his brother. “You traitor, give it back.”

Techno shrugged innocently. “I don’t have it on me anymore. I’d tell you where I left it but it seems to have slipped my mind.”

This time Wilbur didn’t telegraph his movement as he lunged at Techno, but it made no difference as his brother easily sidestepped. Tommy moved back to avoid getting caught in the crossfire and promptly burst out laughing when he spotted the device.

“You dumbass, it’s in your pocket!” he howled, doubling over in laughter as he fell back against the couch again.

Wilbur gaped as he located the phone and Techno smirked at him. He shrugged again before moving back to sit at the island in the kitchen.

Eventually, Tommy’s laughter petered out and he and Wilbur started bickering again. From the sound of it, they were arguing about which bands were better than others as they cleaned up the sitting room and made their way back towards the stairs.

Phil smiled as he watched them go. It was heartwarming to see how fast the two had bonded, despite how much Tommy would probably still stubbornly argue that fact. He was also happy to see Wilbur doing so well. It seemed that his mandated mental health leave was much needed considering how much happier and relaxed he had been in the last few weeks, hanging out with Tommy and working on his music any chance he had.

Techno studied him and waited to speak until the boy’s voices faded in the distance.

“I hope for your and Wilbur’s sake that the rogue was crazy,” he said simply.

Phil frowned slightly. “What? You don’t care about Tommy?”

Techno shrugged. “I don’t really know him and he doesn’t seem that interested in me. I really only care because both of you care so much.”

Phil studied him before he smiled sadly. It made sense even if he didn’t like it. If there was one thing Techno and Tommy obviously had in common it was the inability to hand out trust

easily. The likelihood of them getting to know each other quickly was low.

“Maybe you two just haven’t really had the chance to get connected yet,” he suggested. “You’ve been pretty busy with work recently anyway. Maybe over Christmas or something, you’re still taking that break, right?”

Techno raised a brow. “Christmas? It’s October, Phil.”

“I get the feeling he’ll be sticking around for a while,” Phil laughed. “I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but he and Wilbur are both pretty attached. Plus I’ve already offered him a permanent placement. He’d have to be damn stubborn to turn that down at his age.”

Techno seemed to consider for a moment before he nodded in agreement, adjusting his glasses slightly. “Maybe over Christmas then,” he agreed. “He seems like a decent kid, but it’s not the same when I’m not living here.”

Phil grinned and rounded the counter to clap Techno on the shoulder. “And that’s why we all agreed to take a Christmas holiday this year.”

Techno hummed in agreement as he checked the notifications on his phone. After a bit of scrolling, he sighed. “Unfortunately it’s not Christmas yet, so duty calls.” He stood, retrieving his jacket from the back of his stool.

Phil smiled and dragged the younger man into a hug. “Take care, mate.”

Techno stiffly returned the hug. “I’ll look into the whole Tommy thing when I get the chance,” he said. “Just keep an eye on him until we know for sure.”

Phil nodded as he stepped back. “I’ll check the security system myself but maybe we can get Sam to do a full review of it when he comes over for Thanksgiving. Though hopefully it’s solved before then.”

Techno gave him a blank stare and Phil sighed. “Did you forget that we’re hosting Thanksgiving this year?”

“Yes,” Techno admitted. “But you’re right, I’d hope it would be solved by then.”

Phil shrugged, “Hard to tell with investigative cases, sometimes they can run really long.”

Techno grunted as he shrugged his jacket on. “Tell me about it,” he muttered. “Good luck with the demon children,” he said, waving as he turned into the sitting room heading for the door.

Phil chuckled, waving him off as he turned to finish what was left of his interrupted load of dishes. “There are worse things to have to worry about!” he called back.

“You got that right!” Techno replied. Soon after the front door squeaked as it was pulled shut.

Hopefully the rogue was wrong about there being a gang after Tommy, but Phil wouldn’t be surprised if there was. Even though he couldn’t think of an obvious reason why someone

would want to kidnap the boy, it was obvious that he was a trouble magnet. Plus with Phil's luck, it would only make sense for the newest addition to his household to have someone hunting him down. It seemed to be a family tradition at this point.

But for now, it didn't seem too urgent. Tommy had been here for a month and there had been no signs of someone stalking the house. Phil would make sure to keep an eye out from now on.

He briefly considered the merits of telling Wilbur and decided to hold off for now. There was no need to make him worry until they knew more. They could deal with that bridge when they came to it.

The sound of loud laughter echoing down the stairs made Phil smile as he went back to his chores.

Chapter End Notes

Hmmm... things seem to be happening...

Uh also I've been thinking about maybe... changing a lot of the hero names. I wasn't really planning on this being such a thing but I kind of want to change some of them to more original. Thoughts?

Anyway leave kudos and a comment if you've made it this far <3

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Wilbur packs for an assignment.

Tommy and Ranboo sneak out.

Chapter Notes

I CHANGED A LOT OF THE NAMES!!!

Funnily enough, there aren't hero names in this chapter but I already went back and edited the old chapters. There's a list with the updates [Here](#)

Also woo-hoo two chapters in one week lmao, I'm putting together a full outline and to hit some of my goals there's going to have to be double update weeks.

As always thanks to my beloved Beta <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Tommy, can you pass me my water bottle there?” Wilbur asked, distractedly gesturing in its general direction as he packed his bag.

“Suck my dick,” The teenager shot back, not even looking up from where he was endlessly scrolling through his phone on Wilbur’s bed.

Wilbur sighed and rolled his eyes. Ever since he told Tommy he had to leave for the next week or two the boy had been absolutely insufferable, insulting him and being difficult at every turn.

“Why are you being such a prick about this? I told you I have to leave for a work trip. If I could stay you would have annoyed me into it days ago so trying to piss me off is pointless.”

He shook his head as he stood to retrieve the bottle himself.

“Honestly I wouldn’t be so pissy if you would just fucking tell me where you’re *actually* going,” Tommy grumbled as he sank further into the nest of pillows he had slowly accumulated on the bed.

Wilbur groaned in frustration, “And I told you that I’m *actually* leaving for work. Why can’t you just believe that?”

“Because it’s not true.”

“But it fucking is!” he cried, throwing his hands up. “What the hell else would I be doing Tommy?”

Finally, the teen abandoned his phone, throwing the device into the pillow mountain a bit harder than necessary. He turned to Wilbur with an unimpressed expression. “Okay then, if it is true then tell me what your job is.”

“I already told you, I’m an investigative journalist.”

Tommy rolled his eyes, “Right, a journalist that stuttered like a damn liar the first time he explained it and conveniently has no published papers under his name.”

“I publish under a pseudonym and how dare you insult my stutter, I had to go to speech therapy as a kid and that’s a sore spot thank you very much.”

“The fuck is a sue-doe-nim?” the teen asked like it was an accusation.

“Is a fake name to publish under if you don’t want people to know you wrote it,” Wilbur explained as he stuffed more clothes into his bag. “Like Stephen King publishing under the name Richard Bachman.”

“Okay well, first of all, nobody fucking uses pseudonyms anymore, Stephen King is just dramatic. And secondly, you never went to speech therapy, you went to behavioural and communication therapy for selective mutism. You’re just a dirty liar so I’m gonna keep being as bitchy as I like, thank you very much.”

Wilbur frowned at him. It shouldn’t have even been surprising at this point but it was kind of creepy how perceptive Tommy could be when he wanted to. That and how he always seemed to know things without anybody else knowing how. “Who even told you that?”

“Phil did. I was having another shit day where I wasn’t in the mood to talk and he asked if it was a regular problem, conversation went from there.” He shrugged and turned to stare at the ceiling.

Wilbur shook his head as he returned to finish packing his duffle bag. He hadn’t even realized Tommy had days like that until he pointed it out just now. He knew it wasn’t intentional but the thought made another small part of him hurt at having to leave the kid. He was just a little *too* much like Wilbur was at that age. “Well in that case I’m glad to see that you and Phil are getting along well without me.”

The teen grunted but made no other attempts to argue as Wilbur continued packing.

In all reality, he would prefer to stay. In the month and a half that Tommy had lived at Phil’s, Wilbur had gone on a total of six patrols and stayed at his own apartment a total of eight nights. His mini-meltdown after the human trafficking case had given him a three-week leave

that he spent at Phil's and after that, he had arranged his schedule for the minimal amount of work that he could. It was a much-needed break that was slowly making him jealous of Phil getting to retire.

Getting to spend his days helping Tommy with homework and finally having enough time to sit down and work on his music was like living in a different world. Instead of worrying if he'd have enough energy to make ramen when he got back to his lonely apartment, he got to spend all day arguing about the merits of Italian food versus sushi for dinner. Instead of wincing every time he pulled on his stitches when reaching for the next incident report, he laughed himself into stitches watching Tommy try to build anything that wasn't a cobblestone tower in Minecraft.

Instead of passing out from exhaustion at four in the morning, he went to bed at ten. Instead of waking up in pain from patrol injuries he sometimes woke up at three to a crying teenager who somehow trusted Wilbur to be there for him. No more dragging himself up at one to go into the agency for meetings and paperwork when he woke up at ten to make said teenager a post-shitty-night waffle breakfast.

If Wilbur were legally allowed to quit being a superhero that day, he would do it without a second thought. Sadly that wasn't how the world worked for people with powers of his calibre. If he quit then they would probably put him into a "protective facility" to ensure that nobody could "misuse" his abilities. The true function of that process would just serve as a way to punish him and warn the other heroes like him to stay in line.

"What if I have another bad night while you're not here?" Tommy nearly whispered to the ceiling.

Wilbur had to bite the inside of his cheek in order to avoid pulling a face. That was a low blow but he couldn't react at all because he didn't have a choice in the matter. He had to leave.

A few nights ago Tommy had woken him up in the middle of the night to help talk him down from a panic attack. Afterwards, Wilbur had insisted Tommy stay and promised he could always come to him if he needed it. Not even ten minutes later Tommy passed out to the sound of Wilbur's guitar.

"You know you can go to Phil, right? He'll never get mad at you for asking for help, I promise."

"Phil doesn't get it," the teen grumbled, rolling to bury his face in the pillows.

"I think you'd be surprised how much Phil *does* get it but I'm not gonna force you into anything," Wilbur replied and he closed the final zipper on the bag.

Tommy simply groaned into the pillows, making Wilbur chuckle as he moved to sit on the edge of the bed.

"Why are you acting like this is the end of the world, man? You made it sixteen years without me, I'm sure you can make it two weeks on your own."

Tommy pushed himself up and slammed his arms into the pillows with a muffled *whoomp* . He folded his arms over and rested his head on them facing Wilbur.

“I don’t fuckin’ *need* you, I’m a big man who can fuckin’ handle himself. I’ll be fuckin’ fine for two weeks but the fact that you’re lying to me about what you’re doing is not reassuring that it will actually *be* two weeks. Usually, when people pretend to be investigative journalists and pack a bag full of casual clothes in a style they don’t even wear, it means they’re up to some shady shit. And usually, shady shit goes south and gets people *killed* .”

Wilbur blinked in surprise. The outburst itself wasn’t unusual but it was somewhat alarming that he had noticed the clothes Wilbur packed were plain street clothes he used for undercover missions. At this rate there was no way they were going to be able to keep their identities secret from him for long. Though at the moment he seemed to be making assumptions in the opposite direction from the truth.

He reached over and gently squeezed the teen's shoulder, earning him a sharp glare and silent snarl. “Tommy, I promise that I’m not doing anything shady. This is actually a work trip, even if you don’t believe me.”

“And can you promise that it won’t run longer than two weeks or that you’re *not* at risk of getting yourself killed?” Tommy asked with an accusatory look.

Wilbur hesitated for too long and the boy scoffed, rolling his eyes. “Of-fucking-course you can’t,” he huffed, pushing up off the bed and starting to dig around for his abandoned phone.

“Tommy—”

“Ranboo’s here,” he said, looking down at his newly retrieved phone. “Have fun being an *investigative journalist*, dickhead,” he spat with one last glare before storming out of the room.

Wilbur stared out the door after him and sighed. At least Phil wasn’t on active duty anymore. God knows Techno and Wilbur threw their fair share of fits when the man had to leave on missions. He would hate to see what Tommy’s reaction would have been, especially considering Phil was an even worse liar than himself.

Any other kid would have been totally fooled, Wilbur hadn’t even stuttered that much when coming up with the investigative journalist excuse. But it wasn’t any other kid, it was Tommy, who was so paranoid and perceptive that he even noticed Wilbur's fashion choices and that the clothes he packed didn’t match up. This unfortunately also meant that Wilbur had probably broken some of the teens' trust in him and the cold shoulder treatment could still be there when he got back.

It shouldn’t have hurt his feelings as much as it did. Wilbur had only known Tommy for about two months and the first few weeks of that he had been Whisper, meaning Tommy had only *really* known Wilbur himself for just over a month. They didn’t know each other, not really. It had been a fluke that they got along so well in the first place so it would just take some time to build up *real* trust.

By the time he got downstairs Niki and Phil were standing by the front door chatting while the teenagers were nowhere to be found. Both of them offered Wilbur sympathetic smiles as he approached.

“Tommy seemed pretty pissed,” Niki stated in a veiled question.

Wilbur sighed. “He didn’t really believe that I’m an investigative journalist and noticed that I packed a bag of streetwear instead of sweaters and graphic tees, so take that as you will.”

Niki winced and Phil grimaced.

“Sorry mate,” Phil said, “but it can’t really be helped yet. He’s not gonna run away or anything stupid is he?”

Wilbur frowned, he hadn’t considered that yet. “Mmmm... I doubt it. But just keep an eye on my room. If my guitars mysteriously get smashed or sold then he might be due for a talk about boundaries.”

Niki tiskd. “Tommy wouldn’t do something like that, he—” she paused. “Actually no, he would. He once purposely spilt hot coffee all over a customer just because he was being rude to me.”

Wilbur snorted while Phil pinched the bridge of his nose with a sigh.

“Good for him,” Wilbur said with a grin, earning him a flat look from his father. He turned back to Niki, “Ready to go?”

Niki sighed sadly as she reached to open the door. “Ready as I’ll ever be. Fundy said this one’s gonna be a doozy.”

“Aren’t they all,” he replied with an eye roll. He turned back to Phil with a small smile, “Bye Dad, enjoy retirement and don’t let the children bully you too much.”

Phil laughed at that as he stepped forward to wrap the younger man in a bruising hug. “Stay safe, son. I don’t want to be seeing you in the hospital anytime soon.”

“I’ll do my best,” he replied, stepping back from the embrace. As he moved out the door with Niki he spotted two pairs of eyes peeking up over the edge of the stairs that lead down to the first floor. He tried his best to muster a more confident smile as he met Tommy’s gaze. “You brats stay safe too. No more broken bones, ya hear?”

Niki perked up at that and turned back around to wave inside. “Bye boys! I’ll be back in a few days.”

“Bye Niki,” Ranboo replied, having the decency to sit up and wave back. Next to him Tommy only shot Wilbur one last glare before ducking down out of sight.

Wilbur resisted the urge to sigh as they closed the door behind them. Niki must have noticed, she gave him a gentle pat on the shoulder as they made their way down the front steps.

“None of that now. You and Techno had *way* worse fights than this growing up, and look at how close you are now! He’ll come around eventually.”

Wilbur smiled ruefully as he slid into the passenger seat of her car. “I know, it just sucks. Techno and I haven’t had a real fight in years so it’s just been a while.”

Niki grinned, “I’m glad you guys got attached so fast. He deserves a good home after all the crap he’s been through.”

“We didn’t— well, yeah. I guess it was pretty fast. But in our defence he’s a good kid!”

“You’re preaching to the choir here Will,” Niki said with a laugh. “If Tommy weren’t so damn stubborn Puffy or I would have taken him in years ago.”

He scoffed. “Oh my god, stubborn does not even *begin* to describe that gremlin. It’s probably for the best that he ended up with Phil. God knows nobody can outlast that man’s force of will.”

Niki laughed again. “Well at the very least it will be interesting for sure.”

“This is so weird,” Ranboo muttered as he dropped the Switch controller on the couch next to him, the screen in front of them flashing and declaring Tommy’s Bowser the winner of the race.

Tommy snorted, “What? Not used to *sucking* at Mario Kart? That’s surprising considering you haven’t managed to pass me yet.”

“What? No not— shut up. I mean all of this,” he said, gesturing towards the huge screen projecting their game of Mario Kart and the oversized couch they were lounging on. “A month ago we were sitting in an overcrowded group home looking like mummies and now we’re playing video games at one am in a freaking *home theatre*. Like, what the heck?”

Tommy was quiet for a moment, listening to the sound of rain pittering against the huge picture windows to their left. He was right of course. Even over a month later it still felt like living in a weird fantasy. Though less so since Wilbur lied to him then took off on radio silence. That felt like something that was supposed to happen in his life, people doing shady shit without explanation.

“Enjoy it while it lasts, big man. I don’t think this is going to keep up much longer.”

Ranboo frowned, “What do you mean? You said Phil wanted this to be a permanent placement for you and even Niki brought up that idea for me the other day...”

“They’re hiding something,” Tommy sighed. “It’s not just Wilbur being sketchy either, Phil said there’s a catch he won’t tell me yet. Plus Techno just gives me weird vibes, like ex-military or villain shit. I think they’re into some bad stuff and I can’t— I can’t just ignore it.”

Ranboo stared at him for a minute longer before he sighed. “Don’t do this, Tommy.”

“Don’t do what?”

“You like it here don’t you? Aside from your average levels of paranoia and anxiety, do you like the Watsons?”

Tommy frowned, “What does that have to do with anything?”

Ranboo bit his lip and looked back towards the screen. “You’re looking for problems. You’re looking for a reason not to get comfortable. I’d be willing to bet that there’s a perfectly reasonable explanation for every little thing you’re picking up on that has nothing to do with criminal activity. Don’t ruin this for yourself.”

Tommy nearly growled at that. “*Ruin* this for myself! Don’t fucking start Ranboo, I’m *not* making up problems. I’m telling you that they’re *hiding* something—”

“I’m not saying that they’re not! I’m just saying that you’re jumping to conclusions—”

“Dude, and I mean this in the nicest way possible, fuck you. You don’t fucking know me. You didn’t even know I was a foster kid until we met in that group home so don’t fucking think that you’ve got me figured out. Nightlife Tommy and real Tommy are two *very* different people so just mind your own fucking business.”

Ranboo huffed, snatching his controller off the couch again to start the next game.

“Whatever man,” he muttered.

Having had enough with today Tommy was about to start cussing Ranboo out with as much clarity as an angry, sleep-deprived teenager could manage when both their phones buzzed with text notifications.

Tommy shot his friend a withering look before checking the text. It was from an unknown number.

+4-455-321-4914: Final meeting tonight. It’s really important you come even if you’re retired. I’m ending the network and everyone needs to know why. -HW

He blinked and turned to look at Ranboo, who gave him an equally questioning look as he flashed his own screen.

+4-455-321-4914: I’m ending the network. Final meeting tonight. Make sure T comes with you and don’t wear your gear. -HW

Tommy frowned, video game induced rage forgotten. “Why is he making you babysit me? Rude.”

Ranboo only sighed in defeat, looking mournfully at the pouring rain outside. “Why’s it gotta be raining?” he pouted. “I hate the rain, it burns.”

Tommy snorted. “What about that big ass rain jacket Niki got you? You’ll be fine.”

“But what if someone recognizes me?” Ranboo asked as they started to clean up the living room, collecting all their belongings and turning off the console and screen.

“Oh no, two foster kids that snuck out at night to wander around and cause trouble. Nobody’s ever heard of that before.” Tommy rolled his eyes. “No gear big man, so you get to wear the rain jacket.”

Ranboo gave him a flat look as they headed for the stairs. “That didn’t actually answer the question, though.”

“If someone recognizes us we get in trouble for sneaking out, obviously.”

He made a nervous warbling sound in the back of his throat at that. “Dude, I’ve never been caught sneaking out before.”

“Then I’m a bad influence that peer-pressured you, whatever, I literally do not care. Let’s just get going. We need to be back before five at the latest and if the meeting ends up being long we’re screwed.”

Ranboo made another nervous warbling noise then sighed again. “Okay. Yep, sounds good. Mmhm.”

Tommy snorted at the others nervousness before they got to work on the sneaking out part of the plan.

In the end, they needed Ranboos’ powers to get out of the building. Phil’s security system was too advanced for Tommy to trip unnoticed, so they just stuffed their beds with extra pillows and teleported down the block where they were hopefully out of view.

They kept to the ground as much as possible, not wanting to attract unwanted attention. Luckily, unlike the last night, Tommy was out in the rain, the city seemed pretty dead. The scarce few people they did pass kept their distance, most likely intimidated by the two looming figures that they wouldn’t guess were teenagers at first glance.

Slowly, Tommy became sure that he heard signs of someone nearby. A suspiciously loud splash in a puddle. The scuff of a boot. Rain hitting another jacket. After the first few times he looked to Ranboo to confirm if the other heard it. Without having to speak Ranboo nodded ever so slightly.

Someone was following them.

They waited another five minutes, alert but forcibly casual as they searched for their stalker. Finally, Tommy spotted him. Through an alley on the other side of the block, he noticed the edge of a hood and a boot rounding the corner. He stopped, hoping that catching their shadow would be enough to scare them off. Unfortunately, it wasn't, as the figure stepped out into full visibility.

Behind him Ranboo slowly closed a hand around Tommy's wrist, most likely getting ready to teleport them away. At the other end of the alley, the man slowly drew a hand from his pocket. The dim street light reflected menacingly off of the dark metal of the gun in his hand. Tommy swallowed around the sudden tightness in his throat but managed to raise an arm to flip the hooded figure off just as Ranboo activated his powers. Tommy registered the overwhelming feeling of the wave of static following as they teleported to the end of a different alley.

Ranboo recovered first, surging forward towards the manhole cover at the end of the alley. Tommy took a deep breath to steady himself as the other heaved the heavy cover away from their escape route.

Tommy tensed as he heard heavy footfalls splashing around the corner. He quickly turned to follow Ranboo down into the sewers but just as he crouched down the sound of a gun firing went off, every muscle in his body froze.

"Just come quietly and nobody has to get hurt Thomas!" the man's deep voice called out over rain. "I'll let your friend go and everything! It's not like they'll care enough to search for you anyway!"

How the fuck does he know my name , Tommy thought desperately. He wanted to turn on the man and start cussing him out, to kick his ass and leave him to freeze in the October rain, but he *couldn't move* . The sounds of the gunshot echoed in his ears and he was *fucking frozen* .

A dark hand closed around his wrist and drug him head-first into the manhole, prompting a hasty warning shot from their pursuer. Tommy gasped as Ranboo caught him and he scrambled to get his feet on the ground. The sound of footsteps splashing in the alley became apparent and suddenly they were running into the maze of tunnels.

"Friend of yours?" Ranboo huffed as they skirted around a corner, narrowly dodging a bullet that ricocheted off the wall where they had just been.

"I have no *fucking* clue who that is but he fucking called me *Thomas* and I think he's trying to kidnap me so please just keep running!" He hissed back, forcing down the panic that reared its head with every gunshot that echoed through the sewers.

It was ridiculous that he was panicking about something as mundane as *guns* now. He hadn't really freaked out at the sound of them when the mall was attacked, so why was he losing it *now* . They were alone with no backup on the way and the guy knew his real name, freezing up when a firearm was pointed his way was the *least* useful thing he could do in this situation.

Luckily the two vigilantes moved together with ease, knowing the best routes to navigate through the rank-smelling maze and knowing where the best place to hide would be. They didn't say another word to each other after that, their only interactions being slight shoves or nonverbal warnings to avoid stray bullets.

Behind them, the man kept yelling. "You're wasting your energy, Thomas! You really think a kid like you can avoid me for long?" He punctuated the question with a random gunshot. The bullets ricocheting sounded from the opposite direction of their path. Tommy grabbed Ranboo and forced them to slow into absolute silence. The man had no idea where they were.

"Two skinny little brats that nobody wants versus a professional mercenary? That doesn't sound very fair, does it?" he shouted into the silent tunnels. The sound bounced around and echoed back at them, covering the vigilantes' footsteps and they slowly moved further away. "How about you just give up already? I'm serious if you don't surrender now, I'm afraid I'll have to kill that tall friend of yours when I catch up!"

Ranboo shot him a nervous look as they arrived at their exit, a small grate in the wall that led to a subway service tunnel. Tommy rolled his eyes as he shoved a hand into his jeans pocket to retrieve his pocket knife. Ranboo did the same and they got to work, using the tips of the knives to slowly loosen the screws holding the bottom of the grate in place.

They waited until the man shouted again to risk moving the grate. "Come out, come out wherever you are!" he yelled, following it up with three gunshots for good measure.

Tommy flinched at the sound but didn't let it stop him from ducking into the service tunnel, heart in his throat.

The gun fired once more and Ranboo pulled the grate closed, the noises echoing through the tunnels covered the rusty squeak of its top hinges.

Silently they moved away, deeper into the service tunnel and away from the noise of the mercenary searching for the two teens. Even as the sound faded and disappeared behind them Tommy found that he couldn't relax.

There was a professional mercenary after him. A mercenary after Thomas Innit. He had called him and Ranboo "*skinny little brats that nobody wants*", implying that he probably had no idea either of the teens was a vigilante by moonlight. What the hell would a mercenary want with Tommy's civilian identity? Even worse, who the fuck hired the mercenary?

His mind flashed back to the night the Blackwell's and their suited friends attacked him. Looking back now, he was fairly certain they weren't actually trying to kill him. They were trying to intimidate him at first, then when the fighting broke out they had been trying to grab him. It was an accident that the enderman hybrid had even actually stabbed him.

They had wanted him alive, hadn't they? But *why* ?

"Alright, what the actual *heck* ?" Ranboo whispered once they were far enough away.

“I don’t know,” Tommy croaked, reaching up to comb a hand through his hair. He scowled when he noticed his hands were shaking and stuffed them into his jacket pockets.

Ranboo was quiet for a moment. “Are you alright man?”

Tommy took a shaky breath and shook his head. “I really don’t want to deal with this right now, let’s just— let’s just keep going.”

After a moment his friend hesitantly nodded and moved to take the lead.

Tommy was grateful to have Ranboo guiding them through the underground maze as it allowed him to try and catch his breath. Eventually, he started counting all the little red weeds growing up through the cracks in the floors to calm his racing thoughts. This was something he could worry about later. Maybe he could ask Tubbo to help him figure it out after the meeting, but for now, he just had to make it there in one, relatively sane, piece.

He just kept counting the small red vines as they moved further into the dark tunnels.

Chapter End Notes

Look ma, Plot!

My beta and I were going over my outline last night and laughing at how badly I painted myself into a corner with all these different plots. So get ready for a freaking, like, 700 page book I guess.

And before you think I’m being dramatic we did the math and this will definitely run through Christmas if not into the new year because I’m insane apparently.

Leave kudos and a comment if you’ve made it this far! I always love to see what you guys are thinking <3

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

The vigilantes have a meeting.

Phil gets a concerning text at 4 am.

Chapter Notes

Oops, I meant to post this last night but Happy Halloween! At one point I did want a Halloween chapter on the 31st but oh well, maybe I'll get the next holiday on time...

Also shout out to my beloved Beta and reminder about [hero/vigilante name changes](#).

Anyway, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy grunted as he entered the hideout and was assaulted with a hug.

“You’re alive!” Crumb cried, quickly detangling herself when he froze up at the contact. She punched him in the arm. “Don’t do that again!”

Tommy grinned weakly under his black disposable face mask. “Sorry,” he replied sheepishly. He looked around at the other vigilantes and noted that he and Ranboo weren’t the only ones in casual wear.

Crumb was wearing a long orange rain jacket and white rubber boots, her right arm in a sling and faded bruises on her face peeking out from under her mask and sunglasses. Behind her Tubbo was wearing a black windbreaker over dress pants and shoes, his face only disguised by a black mask that didn’t hide all of the faded bruises on his face.

All the adult vigilantes, Slimecicle, Chiller and Spade, were in full gear. HBomb was nowhere to be found, having been convicted and sentenced with ten to twenty in prison three weeks prior.

To Tommy’s surprise Ted Nivison, the rogue Memoir, was also present and in full gimmick costume, his milkman uniform pristine and white. Slimecicle was glued to his side as he always was when they were in the same place.

Tommy turned back to Amnesia and Haywire. “You two look like shit, what happened?”

“You two smell like shit,” Tubbo countered, “what happened to you?”

Tommy glared at him for a moment, mentally noting to come back to the question later. Whenever Tubbo dodged questions about injuries that meant they weren’t vigilante-related.

“There’s a mercenary trying to kidnap my civilian identity. One that doesn’t know about Theseus,” he replied as evenly as he could manage. “We lost him in the sewers.”

A dark look flashed in Tubbo’s eyes as he looked away and a wave of dread washed over Tommy. “Holy shit, you know why he’s after me, don’t you?”

Tubbo’s eyes crinkled at the edges with a concealed grimace. “I do, but—”

“What the hell man!”

“Just— just let me explain first!” he yelped. “Everyone’s going to have plenty of reasons to get mad at me in a few minutes so just— just let me finish explaining before anyone says anything, okay?”

An odd tension settled over the room as the vigilantes shifted nervously. In most of their experience Haywire was never one to lose his cool. It was odd enough to see him out of his vigilante gear and even weirder to hear him stutter. He always spoke with a controlled confidence that made it easy to forget he was still a teenager.

Tommy got the feeling that all of the older vigilantes were uncomfortably reminded that four of them weren’t even adults yet. They had never shown up to a meeting in casual clothes before.

“You said you’re ending the network tonight,” Spade said. “Why don’t we start there?”

Haywire sighed and leaned back against the empty table behind him. Tommy blinked as he realized that it would usually be covered with Haywire’s computers and tech experiments. All of the workbenches in the room were cleared off, the only things remaining were the heavy black boxes that probably held some of the missing equipment.

“Yeah,” the boy sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose like he was trying to ward off a headache. “Theseus, Amnesia and I are all retiring. And considering EndWalker hasn’t been on patrol in two months, I’d say he might be thinking the same thing.”

Tommy started in surprise, turning to look at Crumb and Ranboo. “Wait... what?”

Crumb’s tail flicked back and forth behind her nervously but she nodded. “I... had an unfortunate run in with a villain that ended with Dream and Firebrand... kind of seeing part of my face. Firebrand let me go but said if I didn’t quit he’d double down and find me. I— uh, I don’t really want to go to jail. So, yeah. I’m quitting while I’m ahead.”

He looked at Ranboo who just shrugged. “Quitting while I’m ahead seems like a good way to describe it. They put *Dream* in charge of my case and I’ve been having nightmares about it since our last run-in. I’m not up for going to jail cause I can’t handle my own stuff anymore.”

Tommy stared at the two, completely at a loss for words. It... it should have made sense but it didn't. He had even admitted to himself that starting vigilante work so young had unforeseen consequences, but watching his peers openly admit the same thing was strange to say the least. He thought he was just being a pussy.

"Why are you so surprised Theseus?" Haywire asked, making him look back over. "You were the first one to quit."

He bristled at that. "Hey I'm not quitting I'm—" he paused trying to gather any coherent thoughts on the subject. Eventually, he sighed. "I'm still deciding what to do. I've just got a lot of shit going on and I can't fix it all at once. But I'm not— I'm not a fuckin' quitter."

"Sorry," Tubbo said with a tired smile in his voice, "quit was a bad word. Either way, none of us are going to be wearing the masks for the foreseeable future. But that doesn't mean I'm not going to be doing stuff that could put the rest of the network in danger."

Tommy frowned at the strange implication.

"What exactly do you mean by that?" Memoir asked with narrowed eyes.

Tubbo shifted awkwardly. "There's a drug that a few of you have already encountered," he began. "It's called *Trigger* and it was made using my powers. Trigger simulates my enhancement ability when injected into a person's bloodstream. It's the drug that Lawrence Gottard used to destroy three blocks of the business district when Amnesia and Captain Sparklez confronted him last month."

The room was dead silent before it exploded into exclamations from all the vigilantes.

"What the fuck?"

"Who the hell made the stuff?"

"How did they get a hold of your powers?!"

"Trigger was made from *you*!?"

"What the *hell* man! Why didn't you say anyth—"

"*Haywire who's making it?*" Memoir's deep voice suddenly cut through the ruckus.

Everyone quieted down, turning back to the teen for answers.

Tubbo, for his part, wouldn't look at them as he fidgeted with a loose thread on the end of his sleeve. "The man producing and distributing Trigger is my father, the villain J. Schlatt."

Once again the room exploded but this time Haywire wasn't having it.

"Schlatt has been working on this my entire life and I never had a choice in the matter!" he yelled over everyone else's voices, making them stop. "But I'm going to fix it before it can

get any further. That's what's going to put the network in danger if I don't burn all our ties," he explained.

Tommy felt like he was going to be sick. He did not like where this was going. "What does this have to do with the mercenary, Haywire?"

The teen didn't look up as he answered, voice shaking. "Your last foster family discovered your powers and sold the information to Schlatt. He wants your powers in order to make a counter agent and a new drug called *Erasure*. The men at your apartment the night they attacked you were sent to retrieve you but a rogue stopped them."

What?

What the actual fuck?

"How long have you known?" he nearly whispered, eyes starting to burn.

"T—"

"How *long Tubbo!*" he shouted, the other's name slipping past his filter in his rage.

"A little over a month!" he cried, eyes shining with unshed tears. "But— but, I didn't think they would send anybody after you because he placed *me* in charge of finding you. I just needed time to get everything together first—"

"What the fuck man?! Over a *mon*—"

"I can fix it now though!" He cut Tommy off. "I'm a student at Prime Academy! I've got an internship with the police and next week I'm getting transferred to work with the detective they just placed in charge of the Trigger case. They're going to do a debrief for all the heroes in the city and I'm going to switch out their presentation with my own and sneak in some extra files with evidence to back it up."

The room nearly burst into objections again but Slimesicles' voice was the loudest.

"Haywire you can't do that it's *suicide*," Slime argued. "If they catch you—"

"It won't matter," Tubbo interjected. "They'll have all the information they need to take out Schlatt's operation as well as the source material for Trigger. It's a win-win situation, but only if I burn all the meta-data and physical evidence that the network ever existed."

Tommy's chest hurt. There was so much happening in this conversation that he couldn't fully process what was going on. However, there was one thing that his panic-riddled mind latched onto.

"Tu— Haywire if they catch you—" his voice cracked despite how hard he was trying to keep it together. "If they catch you, they'll lock you up *forever*. And it's not gonna be one of the cushy institutions because you're a vigilante and a *villain* in their eyes."

Tubbo finally looked up with a wet laugh. “Believe me T, *I know*. But I’m not gonna let Schlatt hurt you because of *my* mistakes. I’m not going to let anybody hurt any of you,” he said, looking around the room at all his allies. “That’s why the network has to go. Just because I’ve made it hard for them to find doesn’t mean I can stop them once I’m out of the way.”

He sighed sadly, eyes falling to the floor as he fell silent for a moment. “Besides, it's not like I’m handing myself over to them,” he said quietly. “I have a couple contingencies that should work. I’m just being extra cautious.”

Tommy stared at him. Tubbo, his best friend. Tubbo, the guy who was put in charge of handing him over to one of the most dangerous villains in the city. Tubbo, who saved his life more times than he could count. Tubbo, who put him in danger for months by not telling him about Schlatt. Tubbo, who was about to pull a stunt so risky he could go to jail for the rest of his life. Tubbo, who was still trying to protect him.

Slowly Tommy shook his head. “No,” he said firmly.

Tubbos' brows drew together in confusion. “No?”

Tommy shook his head again. “No, there had to be another way. Dammit, we’re standing in a room with *seven* vigilantes and one of the most powerful rogues in the city. There has to be —”

“*Three* vigilantes,” Chiller corrected. “You four are retiring, and for good reasons too.”

“The hell I am!” Tommy argued.

“You *are*, Theseus,” Ranboo replied with a shake of his head. “Seriously, you can’t handle vigilante work right now. Don’t think I didn’t notice how you froze when the mercenary pulled that gun.”

Tommy grit his teeth. *Dammit*. Was he really that easy to read? How the hell had he gone so soft in such a short period of time?

The room fell into another tense period of silence at that.

Crumb was the first to break it. “There has to be *something* we can do to help,” she said weakly.

Spade sighed. “I think the best thing the three of you can do to help right now is chill out and lay low,” he said to the teens. “The four of us will do everything we can to help Haywire clean up his plan, but at this point, it seems like the fewer people involved, the better chances he’ll have at success.”

“Spade’s right,” Tubbo agreed. “I really appreciate that you guys want to help, but this is something that will work best as a solo mission. The best thing you can do to help is keep yourselves safe and *far* away from the hero and villain game until this is over.”

Tommy bit his lip to make sure he held his tongue. He still had *plenty* to say to Tubbo but he wanted to wait until they had less of an audience. There was probably more information that they'd never get if Tommy fully lost it now.

Next to him, Crumb nodded weakly while Ranboo seemed to find a sudden interest in the cracked tile floor beneath his feet.

"Is there anything else we should know?" Slime asked, a clear edge to his voice. It seemed as though everyone was holding back some choice words in favour of getting through the meeting.

Haywire nodded, eyes steeling up. "Just some housekeeping stuff for cleaning up evidence and a warning about Trigger."

He paused for a moment, shifting awkwardly. A few people nodded in encouragement and he sighed.

"I'm going to need access to any phone I've ever contacted you on, even if it's a burner, in order to erase any data trails. As well you should turn over all your communicators and gear that has tracking devices or computing abilities. If you don't have it here with you tonight, then smash it to pieces and burn or melt what's left. For those of you retiring, give that same treatment to any remaining piece of gear you own then throw the remains in the bay."

Everyone gave their agreements, many pulling out their phones to offer him. Tubbo collected the devices and set them on the table behind him.

"And the warning about Trigger?" Chiller asked.

The young man nodded. "The short warning is never use it under any circumstances. There are two versions, the pure one, made with my actual genetic material, and the synthetic one, made with an imperfect copy. There's no way to tell the two apart until you take it, and the synthetic one has a high chance of killing you. It's not worth the risk of the drawbacks if it doesn't."

Tommy frowned. "You're saying that it killing you is the better option?" he asked curiously.

Tubbo scratched at the back of his head and nodded. "The true Trigger works just like my powers. It targets the genes related to your own powers and enhances them temporarily to the strongest effect possible. The synthetic Trigger can't target which genes it enhances and it can't return them to their original state."

Slimecicle raised an eyebrow. "So it gives you a *permanent* power boost if it doesn't kill you? How is that a bad thing?"

"It's not the powers that become the problem," he explained. "It's the... other enhancements that are dangerous. The synthetic trigger affects *all* of a person's genes and messing with a living creature's genetic makeup usually has consequences."

“In the trials, there were three outcomes from different test groups. People with little to no family history of hybrid genes usually died or went brain dead when exposed to the synthetic. People with distant genes but no visible hybrid traits spontaneously grew physical hybrid traits and got a permanent power boost with very few side effects. Then those with already visible hybrid traits almost always went feral, their hybrid traits being enhanced further and taking over their minds permanently.

“So that said, it’s not worth the risk,” Tubbo concluded. “Most of the second test group that did survive ended up having a very hard time adjusting to their hybrid traits and rarely learned to fully control their powers again. That’s the best outcome you can hope for, and it’s still not great.”

The uncomfortable tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife. Then everyone started yelling over each other again.

This time Tommy found himself at a loss for words. At a loss for coherent thoughts even.

He found himself remembering the conversation he and Ranboo had in the group home over a month ago. If he had thought they were in over their heads *then*, then what the fuck was happening right now?

Villains making drugs that turned people into hybrids? What kind of eldritch horror science fiction bullshit was that? Not to even *mention* the fact that it was made using Tubbo’s powers, and that there were fucking *test trials* that fucking killed people.

In the end, all his brain could settle on was that this was fucking bad. It was really fucking bad because Tubbo’s powers were ten times more dangerous than Tommy’s.

Tommy’s powers were contact-activated and couldn’t be used on more than a few people at a time in close quarters. Tubbo’s powers were an area of effect type that worked on anybody within a 400-meter radius of him or any single target he chose.

Tommy could turn other people’s powers *off*, which put them on a level playing field with him. Tubbo could enhance other people’s powers up to twenty times their original strength if he wanted to.

Looking at the situation now he was suddenly sickened to realize why Tubbo always seemed to have more control over his powers than Tommy. Tommy spent his life hiding his powers as much as possible. Tubbo was probably forced to train his powers from a young age by his villain father.

Suddenly Tommy found that he no longer gave a shit what the Watsons were up to so long as they weren’t working for Schlatt. He would live with some rich-ass thieves or coke dealers for the rest of his life if it meant he never had to watch people die in trials of a drug made with his powers.

Around him, the arguing was starting to die out as Tubbo answered everyone’s questions, but Tommy was too tired to listen. He got the basics of it and didn’t want to have to think of

anything else. All he had to do was keep his head down and avoid mercenaries until the heroes took Schlatt out. He could do that.

He squeezed his eyes shut, hoping the darkness would be enough to ward off his encroaching headache. A familiar hand gently squeezed his shoulder and he opened his eyes to find Tubbo in front of him, mask pulled down to show his full look of concern.

He saw Tubbo's mouth move but didn't hear what he said. It was only then that he realized his ears were ringing and his heart was pounding in his chest. Oh shit, had he just completely lost himself in front of the entire network? That was embarrassing.

He glanced around nervously and realized the room was now empty save for the two of them.

"I asked everyone to give us a minute," Tubbo's tired voice cut through the cotton in his ears. "I know you're probably still really mad at me, so—"

Tommy dragged the shorter boy into a crushing hug. Tubbo gave a muffled grunt but quickly wrapped his arms around Tommy's torso in return.

"You're an even bigger self-destructive idiot than I am," Tommy laughed somewhat hysterically. "You should have fucking told somebody before it got this bad."

"I know," Tubbo sighed. "I just— I thought I could handle it by myself. But Schlatt's scientists found a breakthrough way earlier than I thought they would and between trying to balance the network, hero school and villain dad... I dropped the ball somewhere along the way I guess."

"Juggling isn't your strong suit anyway. You're a way better ringmaster than clown," Tommy replied before burying his face in Tubbo's hair. His hands were still shaking.

Tubbo huffed lightly at that, his grip tightening on Tommy's rain jacket. "Does this mean you're not mad at me?"

"Yes. No," Tommy sighed. "I don't fucking know. All I know is that if you get arrested I'm going to kill you, revive you and kill you again."

Tubbo huffed. "Good luck with that, boss man," he replied, smile evident in his voice.

Tommy grinned sadly. "I'm serious though. I *will* find a way to see you again. But I'll lay low, for now, just to be safe."

Tubbo turned his head so that his forehead was resting against Tommy's shoulder. "Thank you, Tommy. I'm sorry I'm an idiot, but I'm glad that you're still my friend."

"Always big man," Tommy replied easily.

Tubbo would always be his best friend and not much could change that.

Eventually, if they ever had more time, Tommy would get properly mad at him. But as it was, it looked like this would be the last time they saw each other for a while. So he would let it

go for now.

Just in case it was the last time they ever saw each other, he wanted Tubbo to know that he cared more about him than he did about stupid villains and their games.

The hug lasted just a bit longer, both boys trying to use the other's presence as a last chance to calm down. It was only going to get harder from here, and they wouldn't have each other to fall back on after this. Unfortunately, it was cut short by the *vwoomp* of Ranboo teleporting into the room.

"We should get going Tommy," the enderman hybrid said nervously. "You said Phil wakes up at five sometimes?"

Tommy nodded as he and Tubbo pulled away from each other. "What time is it now?" he asked, prompting Tubbo to turn back to the table of phones behind him. At some point, he had pulled out a laptop that was now connected to Tommy's phone.

Tubbo picked up the device and retrieved another from the table. He handed one to Tommy. "It's three-thirty," he answered, "so you've still got a bit of time."

He turned to hand the other device to Ranboo, who took it with a nod. The two stared at each other for a long moment before Ranboo spoke. "If they catch you, try to send me one last distress signal. I'll come and get you."

Tubbo smiled weakly. "Even if they put me in Pandora's Vault?"

Ranboo returned the tired look. "I'll figure it out," he promised. "It just might take a bit longer."

Tubbo nodded and Tommy held his tongue. He knew no amount of arguing would get either of them to agree to let him help in that escape plan. Hopefully, they wouldn't need it anyway.

Tubbo was the one to close the last few steps between them and Ranboo easily accepted the hug. "Just don't do anything reckless. If you can't save me then don't risk yourself, okay?"

Ranboo frowned, unbeknownst to the shorter boy. "Okay," he agreed quietly.

Tommy could tell he was lying. He didn't blame him. If there was one thing they could always agree on, it was caring about Tubbo. Even if it was to a fault.

Tubbo pulled back from the hug with a curt nod. "Alright, why don't you two get going. I think I still have a couple of ear lashings to get through and you should try to get back with time to spare."

They both nodded in agreement, but all three hesitated to move.

Finally, Tubbo sighed and smiled. "I love you guys, and I'm sorry I let it get this bad. I promise I'll fix it."

“Love you too Tubbs,” Tommy managed weakly. He hated this. It felt too much like a final goodbye.

“It’s not your fault, Tubbo,” Ranboo said. “But I know you’ll fix it. You always do.” He smiled sadly at their friend.

Tubbo nodded but said nothing else as Ranboo placed a hand on Tommy’s shoulder and the two vanished in a cloud of purple particles.

Phil awoke to the sound of a text notification and a light on his ceiling. He groaned sleepily and sluggishly lifted his left wing so he could blindly reach for the device on his nightstand. The only people whose notifications could go through when his phone was in night mode were his pro-hero friends and Tommy and Ranboo.

He brought the device up to his face and squinted against the brightness until his eyes adjusted enough to read.

Jack Manifold: Just saw your mini me and some half and half hybrid kid on the roof of a parking garage in the shopping district. I tried to talk to them but they ran the second they saw me.

Phil reread the text a few times, trying to figure out what it meant. Tommy and Ranboo were sleeping in Tommy’s room upstairs. The security alarm would have gone off if they tried to sneak out—

Oh shit.

Ranboo could teleport.

Suddenly Phil was very awake, practically flying out of bed and painfully bashing his wings off the doorway of his room as he sprinted for the stairs. He took them two at a time and flung open the door to Tommy’s room.

For a moment he was confused when he saw two shapes under the covers of both the bed and air mattress. Then he realized they were completely covered and not moving at all. He stalked over to the beds and threw back the covers to reveal piles of extra pillows from the hall closet.

He stared blankly down at the pillows before looking out the window at the sheets of freezing fall rain pouring down outside. They fucking snuck out in the middle of a storm at— he checked the clock on his phone— *almost four in the morning*. Oh god, how long had they been gone?

Normally he’d be annoyed enough at two kids under his care sneaking out, it wasn’t like Techno and Wilbur never did it. But it was much worse because there was a very real possibility that somebody was out there trying to hunt down Tommy. God knows what they had been doing all night.

For all Phil knew they had been out partying or drinking and were now wandering alone in the dark just *waiting* to get kidnapped.

He cursed to the empty air and turned to run back down to his room.

Phil called Tommy and put it on speaker as he rushed around, getting dressed for the rain.

Surprisingly, Tommy picked up on the fourth ring.

“Um, hi Phil,” he said, tone cautious.

“Tommy, where the hell are you two?” Phil said, tone a bit harsher than he meant as his stress bled through.

“My... room?” he tried hesitantly.

“Oh really? I didn’t know you had a power that could turn teenagers into piles of pillows. You must be great at parties.” He finished pulling on his socks and retrieved his phone from the dresser. “Please just tell me where you are. I’m far more worried than I am mad at this moment and I’d just like to make sure you two are safe as soon as possible.”

“We’re, um, at the 24-hour convenience store on the corner of Bishop and Tenth. We can be back in like half an hour —”

“No, just stay put there please,” Phil said, relieved that Tommy wasn’t making this more difficult than it had to be. He snatched his necklace off the dresser, the familiar weight of the ring settling under his shirt as he started down the stairs towards the front door. “It’s a ten-minute drive, so I’ll be there in a few.”

“O— okay. Um, I’m really sorry for worrying you. It was my idea, I just made Ranboo come with me so don’t be mad at him. He’s a huge pushover, it’s not his fault.”

“Hey! It’s true but you don’t have to say it like that,” came Ranboo’s voice from the background.

Somehow the confirmation that they were both okay made some of the anxiety in Phil’s chest loosen as he tugged on his raincoat. He noted how both the boy’s jackets seemed to be missing from the coat hooks. Good, at least they weren’t dying of hypothermia.

“I’m leaving now, so please don’t go anywhere. *Please,*” he begged.

“Yeah— yeah, sure thing big man,” Tommy stuttered. *“We’re staying put, so, uh, see you in a few I guess.”*

Phil sighed. “See you in a minute,” he replied before hanging up and stepping out into the rain.

Luckily he had left the rental parked in the driveway, in an attempt at a half-assed car wash, before he traded it in for his new car tomorrow. He tucked his wings away before sprinting down the front steps and throwing himself into the driver’s side as fast as he could. He

quickly started the car and peeled out into the rain, racing down the slick streets and most definitely breaking a few traffic laws.

He drove so fast that he was at the corner store in six minutes. It was lucky yet unsurprising that there were practically no other cars on the road in these conditions at this hour.

He pulled up to the empty curb in front of the store and spotted Tommy and Ranboo waiting under the awning out front to stay out of the rain. Tommy had a full bottle of coke in a white knuckle grip while Ranboo seemed to be nervously sipping on a mixed red and green slushie.

Phil sighed and flashed his high beams to get their attention. Tommy recognized the vehicle and nudged Ranboo before moving towards the passenger side door.

“I’m sorry,” Tommy said again as he slid into the front seat, gently shutting the door behind him.

“Sorry Mr. Watson,” Ranboo said as he sat down in the back.

“For the last time Ranboo, please call me Phil,” he said, suddenly exhausted now that he knew both of the boys were safe.

“Sorry, Phil,” Ranboo corrected.

Phil shook his head, eyes tracking the movement of the windshield wipers as they swept away all the rainwater from the glass, only to have to do it again a second later. “What were you two thinking, sneaking out on a night like this? You could have gotten lost or hurt and nobody would have known where you were.”

“Sorry,” Tommy repeated.

Phil sighed again, putting the car into drive and turning in the direction of home.

“If I ask you two what you were doing, would you tell me the truth?” He asked after a moment.

“No,” Tommy said after a moment’s hesitation.

Phil frowned. “Can you at least tell me you weren’t partying?” They didn’t smell like they had been, but he knew it could be hard to tell with foster kids, especially with as much experience as Tommy.

“I can promise we weren’t partying,” Tommy replied with a bitter laugh. “I’m honestly not the biggest fan of parties but it would have been better than tonight.”

Ranboo snorted, “No kidding.”

A touch of concern sparked in Phil’s chest at that. “Are you two alright? No injuries of any kind?”

They both shook their heads and denied it, though Phil couldn't be sure if they were telling the truth. He'd leave it for now, both of them seemed like the type who would snitch if the other had a life-threatening injury.

"Okay, but you do realize how big of a breach in trust this is, don't you Tommy? Not telling me why you were sneaking out in the middle of the night isn't exactly a great way to go about winning my favour."

Tommy was silent for a moment. "I know," he said eventually. "But I can't tell you."

"Are you sure about that?" Phil asked.

"Yes," he replied confidently.

Phil was quiet for a moment. "Well, in that case, you're grounded."

The teen turned to stare at him as they pulled into the driveway. "I wasn't before?" he said, bewildered.

"Well, if you had a good enough reason it would have been negotiable. But you have no reason to give me so you're fully grounded. No video games, no tv, no going out unaccompanied and double duty on chores. Oh, and you'll do your schoolwork in the kitchen and leave your computer with me."

The car pulled to a stop in front of the house and Tommy was still staring at him. "That's it?" he said after a moment.

Phil turned to look back at him as he shut off the car. "Yes? That's kind of everything I can do besides take your phone. But I'd rather you have a way to contact me."

Tommy was still staring at him like he had grown a second head.

"You uh, good man?" Ranboo asked from the backseat.

Tommy finally blinked and looked away with a small smile on his lips. "Yeah... yeah. Yeah, I'm fine. Let's just get inside, I'm fucking freezing."

Phil watched in confusion as Tommy quickly got out of the car and made his way towards the front door. Then it clicked in his head. He remembered their first real conversation in the kitchen the day they went to the mall. "*You're obviously not here to starve me, so if you're not here to beat me or send me packing, then what?*"

Tommy was expecting a *far* worse punishment than a normal grounding. Had Tommy ever even been grounded before? Just normal grounded instead of horrible abuse under the guise of behavioural punishment. Honestly, Phil doubted it.

He sighed as he stepped out into the rain, following after the boys up into the house.

In the foyer, they all ditched their soaked jackets and shoes and Phil finally got a good look at both of the teens. Frankly, they looked awful. Both of them looked exhausted and absolutely

crushed. Tommy's eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot like he had been crying while Ranboo had two irritated-looking burns on his cheeks that seemed to mimic the path of tear tracks.

He really hoped that whatever they were hiding from him was some sort of teenage drama, but he had no way to tell.

Tommy sullenly turned towards the stairs when Phil spoke. "Why don't we go hang out in the kitchen while I make some hot chocolate?" he suggested. "You can put your pop in the fridge and Ranboo can put his slushie in the freezer. I personally am not going to be able to go back to bed right now if you're up for it."

The two looked at each other for a moment. Ranboo nodded and Tommy shrugged, which made Phil chuckle. "I'll take that as a yes?"

"Sure," Tommy grunted while Ranboo nodded again.

Phil slowly made his way into the kitchen, getting out all the ingredients for hot chocolate while he heard the teens shuffling around in the sitting room. Eventually, they joined him at the island bar, Ranboo now wrapped up in a fluffy couch blanket and Tommy buried in one of Wilbur's sweatshirts. Phil couldn't help but smile at the sight.

As mad as he wanted to be at the two for sneaking out, it wasn't what they needed at the moment. Obviously whatever they had been doing was not fun, and they hadn't fought him at all in the process of finding them and getting them home safe. What they needed at the moment was hot chocolate and probably a cute kids movie to cheer them up.

"You guys feeling up for a movie night slash morning?" he asked, glancing at the clock that now read 4:17. "Tomorrow's still the weekend so it's not the end of the world if we lose some sleep. Plus it can be your movie choice."

Tommy shrugged noncommittally and Phil resisted the urge to frown. It looked like he wasn't going to be in much of a talking mood anymore. That was fine though, he'd just have to change his questions to yes or no answers.

Ranboo seemed to consider the question while watching Tommy from the corner of his eye. He readjusted the blanket around his shoulders and turned his gaze back to Phil's general direction, not quite looking him in the eye. "How about Up?" he asked.

Phil smiled. "Sounds good to me. Tommy?"

He looked over to the other boy and found him gently smiling. He glanced at Phil and nodded, his eyes suddenly looking brighter at the idea. Somehow the expression made him look younger, like an actual sixteen-year-old instead of the jaded warrior he sometimes appeared to be.

"Well then," Phil said with his own gentle expression, "once we have our hot chocolate, Up it is."

Chapter End Notes

Aw movie night isn't that sweet <3 Just watch Up to forget that your best friend was raised by and experimented on by horrible villains :)

Anyway, the next chapter was pretty fun to write and my betas favourite so far so get hyped 🍷

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

The Blade finally catches up with Foolish.

Tubbo makes a risky play.

The heroes Trigger briefing goes *Haywire*.

Chapter Notes

This chapter went through the damn ringer in edits so thank you beta for making me keep it as this draft. I really love how it turned out.

And thank you amazing readers for all your lovely comments, they always brighten my day <3

Reminder about the [Hero/Vigilante name changes](#) and enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Foolish, in all the weirdest ways, was somehow nothing like Techno expected he would be.

Techno had seen pictures of the man and thought he knew what he would find, but *man* was he wrong. Though the pictures were nearly 100 years old he figured that the kind of poise and power the man radiated would be a permanent fixture. Instead of the blood-soaked mercenary in the three piece suit, posing like a model for his mug shot, Techno was met with just some dude in a shark hoodie.

The rogue had yet to notice him, meaning that the hero got a front-row seat to watch as he dropped his half-eaten slice of pizza on the warehouse floor, stared at it for a second then shrugged and picked it up again. He dusted it off and continued eating like nothing had happened.

How someone could go from being known as one of the greatest killers in history to behaving like a college student with low standards was beyond him. No wonder the idiot thought it was a good idea to provoke Techno, he obviously had no brain cells left.

The Blade awkwardly cleared his throat as he stepped out of the shadows, making Foolish jump a little and fumble with what was left of his pizza.

“Oh shi’! Hey m’n,” he said through a mouthful of food. He hastily chewed and swallowed before speaking again. “Didn’t see you there,” he chuckled nervously. “How, uh, how long were you standing there?”

Techno fixed him with a blank stare behind his mask. “Long enough,” he replied.

“Right, right. Cool, cool, cool.” He looked at the remains of his slice before deciding to toss it into the empty pizza box resting on the stack of wooden crates behind him. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and grinned, clapping his hands together. “So, I hear you’re looking for my sister.”

The Blade tilted his head ever so slightly. “I wasn’t aware that she was your sister.”

Foolish’s smile morphed into more of a grimace. “Yeahhhh, world’s pretty crazy like that. The details are a little fuzzy but I think she’s technically my younger sister, not that we talk a lot or anything. But that’s beside the point, what I’m trying to say is that I’ll help you find her.”

Techno frowned. “You’d just give up your own sister like that?”

Foolish shrugged. “I’ve been in her place, high on power and out for blood, it’s not healthy. I was pretty damn unstoppable until one day I went too far even by my standards, I turned myself in and swore off killing. I think she’s due for a similar lesson sooner than later and if I have to help her along in learning it, so be it.”

Techno considered that for a moment. Most of the documents concerning the original arrest of the villain Foolish were redacted or lost, so he hadn’t been able to gather much information on why he was now considered a rogue. It made sense if the villain had had a change of heart and decided to stop killing but still operated outside the law with whatever he did.

Villains actively went out of their way to cause harm to society, rogues did whatever the hell they wanted but caused no harm to civilians, vigilantes actively helped civilians but without the proper training and credentials. It wasn’t uncommon for the lines between rogue and vigilante to blur, but it was uncommon for the villains to become rogues.

Techno hummed. There would be no murder or stabbing today apparently, but he would take what he could get. “So you don’t know where she is at the moment?”

“Oh no, I know where she is,” the rogue replied. “If you can get a team ready for tomorrow night then I can take you there, but only if you and I can strike a deal.”

Techno resisted the urge to sigh. Great, making more deals with rogues. If this ever got back to the hero commission they would probably suspend his license and put him on house arrest. And that was the best-case scenario.

“What do you want in return for your help?” he asked, more annoyed than curious.

Foolish studied him for a moment. His green eyes looked like polished chunks of emerald with no way to differentiate between the iris and the rest of the eye. Techno decided that Foolish was also kind of creepy, though not quite as much as his friend Karl.

“I want a favour,” he said like it was a simple request. “In the past, other Blood Gods and I have had excellent relationships that resulted in many victorious battles. Obviously, though, I’ve changed and you aren’t much like your blood-thirsty predecessors, so it won’t be the same kind of deal.”

Techno internally bristled at the idea that there had been previous incarnations of the Blood God. Logically he knew that the cult must have just chosen a different kid in every generation to claim as their new messiah but the way that Foolish said it was not unlike how Karl did. He believed in the Blood God on a different level.

Should he be concerned that a time manipulator and a possible immortal both seemed to agree that the Blood God was real? It seemed like it should be concerned but he couldn’t find it in himself to care at the moment.

“If it’s not a war favour then what are you thinking?” Techno questioned. He was in deep now so he may as well commit.

Foolish hummed as though he were considering. “More like a personal favour. If me or one of my friends is in a tight spot, I can call on you to help us out. Say someone’s under heavy fire from a villain that doesn’t like them or about to get arrested when they’d rather not. You do your best to help them out at my request then we’re square.”

That didn’t sound so bad, as long as Techno could add a condition. “Is this open for discussion or is that a final offer?”

Foolish raised an eyebrow curiously. “It’s an open discussion I suppose. Something to add?”

The hero nodded. “On the condition that the favour cannot put my career at major risk. If the person you want me to help was arrested in front of a large audience and I can’t help them without being an obvious traitor, I won’t do it.”

“Deal,” the rogue nodded quickly. “So does tomorrow work? I’m pretty busy most of the time, but I’m clear for tomorrow.”

Techno shook his head. “No, I can’t get the team ready for tomorrow, unfortunately. There’s a pretty important briefing we have to be at.”

Foolish frowned, a look of confusion crossing his face. “Important briefing… wait. What’s the date today?” he muttered, reaching into his hoodie pocket and checking his phone. Slowly a grin spread over his face. “Actually, I think I’m going to have to call in that favour now.”

Techno frowned. “Heh?” He did not like where this was going.

“I promised I’d help someone find a way to sneak some evidence into the files intended for that meeting,” Foolish explained. “We’ve been at a bit of a standstill with it, but *you* have the

solution written all over you.” He gestured at Techno’s whole hero costume for emphasis.

“You want to use your favour... to help sneak evidence *into* a briefing presentation,” he clarified. “Why would a rogue want to help heroes get more information for a case?”

“Because the person I’m helping is a vigilante,” Foolish answered distractedly as he typed furiously on his phone. “Your briefing tomorrow is about the Trigger case and the vigilante I’m helping was an unwilling accomplice in creating the drug. He has *all* the information about it and wants to make sure you heroes get it in order to take down the distributor as soon as possible.”

Techno couldn’t help but stare. “You’re telling me that you’re using up your one favour with the number one ranked hero in order to help someone else?”

Foolish looked up from his phone with a sly look. “Is that really so hard to believe? I’m also helping you track down and arrest a villain that’s been running you and the Vulpine agency ragged for almost two months. I like to help people that I like,” he shrugged casually.

The hero watched as Foolish rapidly texted back and forth with someone, completely lost in the planning zone.

Eventually, Techno huffed. In a different world, Foolish would have made a good hero. Despite his dark origins he seemed to have the heart and mindset for it now, and as stupid as he looked at first glance, Techno had met less competent people with hero licenses.

“How about I give you a way to contact me and we work out the finer details later?” Techno suggested after a few minutes. “Obviously you and the vigilante have some planning to get through.”

After a moment’s consideration, Foolish hastily agreed and they traded contact information for Techno’s burner phone before parting ways.

As he ran back through the city he considered everything he had learned from that meeting. Moo was Foolish’s sister. Foolish was a rogue that liked to help out vigilantes and heroes while putting mass murders in jail. The vigilantes were working on the Trigger case. One of them was an unwilling accomplice in its creation and was trying to fix their mistakes.

Techno found himself wondering if that vigilante was one from Theseus’s network or someone far more underground. Either way, he would probably find out something when he retrieved the files.

For now, he had to worry about how to sneak said files into Fundy’s existing information. Considering how damn busy the office was, and how often The Blade had been there recently, it shouldn’t be too hard. He just had to find the perfect way to make sure he wasn’t caught on camera. Once the heroes and detectives in charge of the investigation realized there were extra files, they’d be all over it trying to figure out who compromised their evidence.

Techno decided to turn in the direction of his apartment. Whatever meeting Foolish would set up to get the files would most likely end up being in the morning, so he may as well get as

much rest as possible.

Tomorrow would be interesting, to say the least.

Tubbo felt like he was going to explode as he waited for The Blade to arrive at the coffee shop.

Was this a really bad idea? Probably. Was Tubbo running out of options? Yes. Yes, he was.

The original plan had been for Quackity to plant the files. It was full proof because Quackity knew everything about Tubbos' plan and as Ace he was a trusted member of the hero community who could talk his way out of anything with his silver tongue and luck powers. That plan fell through when Quackity managed to catch Schlatt in a bad mood while delivering the news that they failed to capture Tommy.

Schlatt, unfortunately, lost it, ending with him shooting Ace in the arm then beating the living hell out of him. Quackity tried his best to deal with the injuries on his own but got caught between a rock and a hard place on patrol a few days later. From what Tubbo managed to gather, Ace awoke in the hospital to Dream questioning where his other injuries came from. When he failed to lie his way out of it Dream suspended him and put him on medical leave. And now Ace wouldn't be attending the briefing.

So here Tubbo was, dressed in casual civilian clothes with his face covered in makeup to hide the bruises on his eyes and jaw. He was sitting at the back corner of a local cafe sipping on a dark roast with far too many espresso shots and trying to look casual while he scrolled through his phone.

On the other side of the room waited a black backpack with all the files neatly tucked into it. Tubbo had bribed the waitress into leaving it unattended with an extra \$100 in cash. She was hesitant about the idea until she saw the money in his hand and left it without a word.

The small bell above the door rang as it opened and it wasn't hard to identify the man who stepped through.

The Blade was also dressed in casual civilian wear but he wore a disposable blue mask to conceal the lower half of his face. His long pink hair was pulled up into a messy bun and there was a pair of square-framed glasses perched on his nose. If Tubbo passed him on the street he would never have guessed the man's identity. He just looked like a tired college student.

The hero glanced around the cafe as Tubbo returned to looking at his phone, only watching what the hero did in his peripheral vision.

To his surprise The Blade walked up to the counter, ordering a coffee and a bagel in a familiar deep voice. Tubbo had heard it enough times through Theseus's comms. Once he received his drink and breakfast the hero retreated to the table with the backpack.

He sat for a few minutes with his coffee before picking up the bag to check its contents. A second later he set it back down and returned to his food.

Tubbo did everything in his power not to let his agitation show. He couldn't leave until the hero did. Those were the only copies of the files he had, now that he had destroyed all his vigilante gear. If the hero just left them here and Tubbo showed up to his internship without a way to get them in, his presentation would be useless. The evidence had to make it there one way or another.

Eventually, after an hour the young vigilante determined that the hero was waiting him out. He was trying to see who in the cafe came and went so he could determine who his contact was. Tubbo internally cursed himself. He was already missing classes for this. If he showed up at the internship after missing all his classes someone would ask questions. But if he left now he couldn't guarantee that the hero would take the files.

But if he stayed for too long, the hero could suss him out.

His hand tightened on his empty coffee cup and he glared at his phone. What should he do?

As though he could hear his thoughts, The Blade suddenly stood. He nodded at the waitress as he swung the bag over his shoulder. But instead of making his way over to the door, he passed it and made a beeline for Tubbo.

Tubbo forced himself to look up in confusion as the man crouched next to his table.

"Uhhh, can I help you?" he asked in a tense tone, internally grimacing at how not casual it sounded.

"If you're going to try and hide bruises with makeup, you should use a foundation that's actually your colour," the hero suggested.

Tubbo's eyes widened as he turned to meet The Blade's cold amber gaze. He had totally been found out. Would the hero do anything about it?

If he made any expression when the teen looked over at him, Tubbo couldn't read it. The hero only gave him a once-over before making eye contact again.

"I'd suggest a lighter shade, and maybe a more expensive one. It's too easy to spot the texture of it when it's watery like that. Plus you should go for a more even application if you really want it to be seamless."

Tubbo stared at the hero in shock. "Are you seriously giving me makeup advice right now?"

The Blade shrugged. "Foolish wanted me to help you as his favour. I'm helping you." He pushed to his feet with the grace that only a fighter or dancer could. "I was wondering how a vigilante could unwillingly help create a drug like this, but now I know. Take it from someone that was raised by villains, the consequences you'll face for willingly coming forward aren't nearly as bad as you'd think. You're obviously in a bad situation and nobody's going to put all the blame on you."

Tubbo couldn't help the bitter smile that crossed his lips at that. "If only that were true in my case."

The Blade studied him for a moment longer before he shrugged. "I'll make sure to hold up my end of the bargain, so make sure Foolish upholds his." And with that, he turned to leave without looking back.

Tubbo sat for a few minutes after the hero left, still in some level of shock. Hopefully, the fact that the hero was involved in his own kind of shady business would keep him from admitting that he knew who Tubbo was. Or maybe he still didn't know he was Haywire, just that he was some vigilante kid.

Either way, Tubbo had to get to school. He ran as fast as he could to the parking lot behind the cafe and threw on his helmet as he started up his motorcycle. He still had a lot of prep to get through to make sure he wasn't in jail by the end of the day.

Techno ended up using a rather crude but effective form to get the files mixed in. He "accidentally" body-checked Vulpine while he and Detective Smajor were moving the files into the small auditorium for the presentation.

"What the hell Blade? Ever heard of watching where you're going?" Vulpine grouched as he started collecting the fallen files from the floor next to him.

"Sorry," Techno replied lamely as he crouched to help.

While they were scraping files back into a semblance of piles, Techno slipped the extra files out from under his cape and shuffled them into the mix.

Fundy sighed in annoyance and he stood with his awfully disorganized files. "Scott, where's your intern?"

The detective frowned and looked around the hall, confused to see no one else with them. "I'm not sure," he muttered. He turned back in the direction they came from. "Tubbo!" he called down the hall.

"Sorry!" a familiar voice distantly called back. Techno watched in utter confusion as the kid from the cafe came jogging around the corner and stopped in front of the detective. "I was in the washroom," he said, eyes darting to Techno but making no other reaction.

Techno didn't outwardly react aside from staring at the kid. He seemed to have taken his advice from the cafe seeing as it was significantly harder to spot the makeup on the kid's face. It was applied well enough that he almost wanted to assume someone with more experience did it. It would be nearly impossible to notice if Techno hadn't been looking for it.

The kid was now wearing a Prime Academy uniform, the bright blue tie was unmistakable after Techno attended the same school for so many years. Over top of his dress shirt, he was

wearing a dark blue windbreaker that probably said something like *POLICE* or *INTERN* instead of his school blazer.

The vigilante kid who probably lived with abusive villains also went to the most exclusive hero school in the country. The situation alone was bad enough, knowing that the kid was probably stealing information for villains from his school and agencies he worked with. But if he had access to this meeting, then why did he need Techno to plant the files for him?

Suddenly he was far more concerned about what the vigilante was planning. This was more complex than just planting new evidence files and Techno didn't know what the other part was. The kid had seemed fairly timid earlier but people like Foolish Gae'meers considered him a friend so he couldn't be as harmless as he looked.

"Here," Vulpine said to the vigilante-intern. He handed him the scattered pile of files in his hands and nodded at Techno to do the same. "Reorganize these by the colours on their tabs and put all the colourless ones on the bottom in order by date. But don't worry about any of the stray papers, just put them in their own pile and I'll r—"

"Vulpine!" a sidekick interrupted from down the hall. "The archive room's network crashed again and it locked us all out of the system!"

The fox-hybrid groaned, "That's not my problem! Molly is the head of the IT department—"

"Molly went on mat-leave last week and we need an administrator password to log into her account to fix the lock-out," the sidekick interrupted again. "It'll be like ten minutes, tops. We can't print the last few packets until it's fixed—"

"Fine! Fine," Vulpine nearly snarled, ears laying back against his head. He turned to Tubbo and dropped a USB drive on top of the pile. "Don't let that out of your sight and don't mess with it. The whole presentation for the briefing is on it, so I'm trusting you Stubbo—"

"Tubbo," he corrected.

"—Whatever. Seriously, that drive better be in one piece when I get back!" he called over his shoulder as he moved down the hall, following after the harried-looking sidekick.

"I won't let you down sir!" Tubbo yelped after him.

Next to the intern Detective Smajor was looking down at his phone and muttered something under his breath. "Sorry Tubbo, I have to let Detective Shubble through security. Her ID badge isn't scanning right in the system and they need someone to vouch. Why don't you just head to the auditorium and organize the files there?"

"Sounds good," the teen replied in a chipper voice. "Have fun with security!"

Smajor laughed bitterly. "I always do!" he called back and he took off towards the elevators.

Then Techno and Tubbo were alone in the now empty hallway.

The intern glanced at him, then past him for a moment. Techno turned his head to spot the security camera behind him before looking back at the teen.

“Thanks,” Tubbo said in a considerably less enthusiastic tone from before. It was the same voice he spoke in at the cafe that morning.

Techno looked down at the mess of files and the USB drive in his hands then back up at the kid. “You’re... welcome,” he replied hesitantly. “Though I don’t really know why you needed my help.”

Tubbo offered him a tired smile. “Oh, believe me, I needed it. I still kinda do actually. Do you think you could point me in the direction of the auditorium? I’m a bit turned around at the moment.”

Techno snorted at that. All that planning and he didn’t know how to properly navigate the building. “Just follow me, I’m heading that direction anyway.”

Their journey to the auditorium ended up taking them through one of the open office spaces where a number of people were gathered around the coffee machine in their path. Suddenly Tubbo tripped, sending him and all the files crashing to the floor again.

Everybody at the coffee machine started before dropping down to help the kid collect the files. He began profusely apologizing and thanking people and it was then that Techno realized the kid was an evil genius. He was making sure that the files passed through so many hands that they would have to investigate everyone here when they looked for who slipped them in.

Techno also couldn’t help but be a little impressed when someone handed the USB drive back to Tubbo and saw the kid palm it and replace it with an identical drive. His body was even angled away from all the cameras in the room. They would never be able to tell who switched them even with the footage.

Tubbo thanked everyone who helped as he handed half of the stack to Techno and they got back on their way. They all wished him luck and moved to let them through.

He and Techno said nothing to each other the rest of the way there.

When they arrived many of the seats were already full, taken by heroes and officers that needed to be in the know about the Trigger case. Tubbo thanked him and made his way to the tables set up at the front of the room next to a presentation podium. He got to work organizing the files and made sure to place the USB drive in full view. Sneaky brat, nobody could accuse him of tampering with it when every hero in the building was watching.

He decided on sitting peacefully in the back of the room so nobody could see his lack of surprise when the presentation didn’t go according to plan. Sadly he was soon interrupted when his brother and his friends burst through the door, chatting loudly.

“Hey!” Whisper called out to the intern. “Tubbo, right?”

Tubbo looked up with a grin, “Hey Whisper! I’m surprised you remember me.”

“Oh Tubbo my man, I never forget a face,” Whisper replied playfully, making Nix and Thunderstrike roll their eyes.

Tubbo laughed, though Techno could hear the undercurrent of nervousness. “That’s cool. Must be a great skill for hero work.”

“Yeah, too bad he doesn’t actually have it,” Thunderstrike snorted.

Nix chuckled at Whisper’s overplayed body language to let Thunderstrike know how scandalized he was. “You wound me, good sir,” he gasped.

Nix rolled her eyes again and grabbed Whisper's arm. “We should let Tubbo get back to work,” she said as she dragged him away.

“Nice to see you again Tubbo!” Whisper called over his shoulder as Nix and Thunderstrike spotted the empty seats next to Techno and dragged him up the short stairs.

Tubbo waved and returned to organizing his piles.

Wilbur pushed his goggles up off his face when he flopped down in the seat next to Techno.

He could feel Wilbur's gaze rake over him before his eyes narrowed.

“You’re acting weird,” his brother informed him.

“Am I?” he asked without looking over at him.

Wilbur studied him for a moment longer before he turned away with a huff. “We’re talking about this later,” he declared. Techno made no reply.

He sat in silence for the next twenty minutes while Wilbur, Niki and Jack chatted away. It wasn’t unusual for The Blade to be rather cold when he was on duty, so they probably thought nothing of it. Slowly more heroes and detectives trickled into the room, filling in the remaining empty seats in the auditorium that could only seat around 40 people.

Techno found his eyes narrowing at the final group to arrive. Onyx, Zirconious, Permafrost, Refractz, Scarlet Thorn and The Captain all arrived together and seemed oddly hesitant to split up and fill in the remaining seats. It wouldn’t be that odd of a group on a normal day but Techno was picking up... *something* coming from them. He glanced at the other occupants in the room and found that none of them seemed bothered. Maybe he was just being paranoid.

Once they were seated Vulpine and Detective Smajor returned, kicking Tubbo out of the room and messing around with their files and presentation before finally starting the meeting.

It started off as boring as any other briefing. Most of the information Techno had already been subjected to learning through Fundy’s sleep-deprived rants while reviewing the information on the Death Totem’s case. Sadly it wasn’t much.

The drug was called Trigger. It kept popping up in majorly destructive villain fights. Half of the people that took it died for some unknown reason. They didn't know what it was made of or where it was coming from. Everyone in the room was being informed of its existence for either future safety or because they were about to be assigned a case relating to the investigation.

Then as Vulpine clicked the computer to move to the next slide the screen went black for a moment before a new photo appeared on the projector screen.

In the photo was a ram-hybrid in a suit and red tie speaking to a familiar-looking cow hybrid woman. The man was gesturing to a briefcase on a nearby table that was open to reveal ten vials of purple liquid in syringes, ready to go. Moo Gae'meers seemed very interested in what the man was saying, her eyes fixed on the briefcase.

"This is a photo of the man who commissioned the creation of Trigger, J. Schlatt," a distorted computerized voice spoke over the sound system. *"The woman is the leader of the Death Totems gang, she bought the first complete batch of Trigger for ten thousand dollars. She has only been recorded using one vial when she killed thirty men at the north port two months ago. Nine of those vials remain unaccounted for."*

"What the fuck is this?" Vulpine said and he clicked violently on the laptop's keyboard. "I can't use the computer anymore, it locked me out!"

"Now before you do something drastic like trying to shut off the device presenting this, I suggest you just listen to what I have to say," the computerized voice said. *"I am the vigilante Haywire. Mixed in with all your files is evidence to back up what I'm about to tell you, but once this presentation is ended it cannot be restarted. This is the easiest way to inform a large group about this drug and its history, but I'll give you a few minutes to debate."*

The screen changed once again to show a green clock that read 00:02:59 before it began to count down. Vulpine and Detective Smajor gave the screen the same dumbfounded look as everyone else in the room before they began to frantically search through the files, easily locating them in the date-organized pile.

From then on it played out like Techno expected it would the moment he saw Tubbo switch out the USB drives.

The room erupted into an argument about the merits of listening to what the vigilante had to say before finally settling on letting the video play out. They sat the final 30 seconds in tense silence before the automated voice returned and began to explain.

Haywire left very little to the imagination as he explained. He covered the history of Trigger being made from a human's power, included video evidence of the effects of the pure versus the synthetic trigger agents, revealed the distribution network, and named every gang and villain involved before he went on to reveal the big picture.

"Schlatt is already in the process of making a new drug that will have the opposite effects of Trigger. The drug, Erasure, will be made the same way, using human power as its basis. He

will then create a second market and hopes to inflate the price of both using an artificial supply and demand chain that depends on both drugs and law enforcement losing so much control over the situation that they are forced to buy into it as well.

“I present you with all of this information and the evidence to back it up in the hopes that you can stop the situation in its tracks. I have been aware of this for a very long time but have finally come to the conclusion that I alone am not enough to take down his operation. Should you accept that I am telling the truth and act off the information you now have, I will do my best to sabotage the villains involved.

“Hopefully if we combine forces this threat can be eliminated before it ever truly begins. However, that is up to you. I thank you for your time and anxiously await to see what you will do about the situation. Haywire.”

The screen flickered to show the vigilante's name, signed as though it were a letter before the presentation vanished.

The room stewed in tense silence as everyone processed all the information they had just been given. Obviously, they weren't going to let this go. Haywire had presented so much video and photo evidence that there was no denying that most of what he said was probably true.

However, that didn't stop Dream from starting an argument. Dream hated vigilantes more than anybody Techno had ever met. He wasn't about to just roll over and use vigilante sourced information without being difficult first.

For once though The Blade had no scathing remarks to add to the fight that broke out between Whisper, Onyx, Vulpine and Dream. He was too busy trying to organize everything that *he* knew about the situation and how the vigilante related to it.

Techno knew a few things that nobody else did. Foolish said that his vigilante friend was an accomplice in the creation of Trigger. Techno was certain that the vigilante friend was Tubbo, who was currently hiding a black eye with concealer and didn't deny it when Techno assumed the villains had something over him. He was also fairly certain that Tubbo was Haywire.

Around him, the argument was coming to a breaking point where everyone began to take sides. Then it finally clicked. Haywire knew so much and cared so much about this case because it was about *him*. Haywire must have been the human agent that they got the genetic material from. Tubbo, a hero student by day and a vigilante by night, was the kid Schlatt used to experiment on for literal *years*.

Suddenly Techno wanted to kill someone again. A very specific someone.

“Blade,” an urgent voice suddenly cut through his thoughts. He blinked and turned to find his brother watching him with concerned eyes. “Hey man, you good?”

Techno blinked again and noticed that almost everyone in the room had turned to stare at him. Ew. “I'm fine,” he huffed. “Has everyone realized that his argument is pointless yet?”

“We were doing a vote on whether or not to throw out the vigilantes' claims,” Detective Smajor said from the front of the room. “Apparently the room is very divided, so you’re the deciding vote.”

Dream scoffed. “Seriously? He was fucking asleep! I doubt he was even paying attention when he was awake either. Everybody knows The Blade doesn’t give a shit about investigations or evidence—”

“Haywire’s not lying,” Techno spoke over him. “I think we should use the info. There was too much photo evidence in that presentation to just ignore and I’d be willing to bet that there's more he didn’t cover in the files. If it's half as bad as Haywire says it is then we should put together a plan before it gets any worse.”

Vulpine tilted his head curiously as the room erupted into quiet muttering. Maybe he had come on uncharacteristically strong with that stance but he couldn’t find it in himself to care. This case mattered more than Dream's weird hatred of vigilantes.

“Any particular reason you have such a strong opinion on this case?” Vulpine asked. “Dream’s not entirely wrong when he says that you don’t tend to care about investigations like this.”

Techno snorted. “I don’t see how it matters either way. A majority of the room seems to care. If Dream doesn’t like it he can leave.”

“Hey—” the green-clad hero started, only to be cut off by Smajor.

“Let’s not start gentlemen. We voted, and we're moving ahead with looking into Haywire's information. For now all the cases we would have assigned now need to be readjusted as we reassess our information, so this officially concludes our meeting. Everyone, thank you for coming. We will be in contact about mission assignments for this case soon.”

With that, the house light came on and all the heroes returned to arguing amongst themselves.

Techno made no move to stand and, at his side, neither did Wilbur.

“Blade, what’s going on here?” he asked in a low voice, his dark eyes shining with urgency in the low lights.

“I’ll tell you later,” Techno grunted, pushing to his feet. “You done with your undercover case yet?”

Wilbur stood, still giving him a wary look. “Yeah. I was gathering info for this briefing and they didn’t give me another assignment, so I’m good. Why?”

Techno sighed. Out of the corner of his eye he watched as Vulpine and Smajor called Tubbo into the room and began to interrogate him a bit harshly. He frowned. “Let’s go back to Dad’s place tonight,” he suggested. “I don’t feel like doing any more hero work today.”

He could almost feel his brothers frown as they made their way towards the exit. “Sounds good to me,” he agreed eventually. “I wouldn’t mind the night off.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh man, what could possibly happen next?! Find out next time!

Seriously though this was a crazy chapter and we've once again caught up with my fully edited chapters so the updates might be weird for a bit. Apologeeese lol.

If you feel like it, leave a comment and let me know what you're excited to see more of with all these intersecting plots!

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Techno and Wilbur go somewhere to talk.

Tommy has trouble sleeping.

Chapter Notes

I can't believe I've stayed committed to the 6k minimum chapters. Imagine how many chapters there would be if I split every scene into its own, holyyy. Thank you Beta for taking the time to help with this absolute monster of a project <3

As always thank you for all the love and awesome comments. Enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur sighed quietly as he mulled over everything his brother had just told him. Of course he had no reason to doubt Techno, but it was a lot to take in.

“So let me get this straight,” he said without taking his eyes off the ocean horizon. “You went off the books hunting rogues, made a deal with said rogues, then helped a vigilante as part of that deal. And you’re telling me that Tubbo, the police intern, is actually the elusive vigilante Haywire *and* the source of the biological agent in the stable Trigger compound?”

“That about sums it up,” Techno replied as he slowly stretched his legs out in the sand. “You don’t believe me?”

Wilbur took a moment to just soak in their surroundings as he considered his answer.

They had decided that this conversation was too sensitive to have anywhere in the city, so they had driven a couple of hours out past the bay to the coast. The beaches here were completely abandoned, considering that the fall chill had fully set in at this time of year. They left their phones in the car and walked down the cold stretch of sand until the vehicle was out of sight, nobody would ever know this conversation happened.

The wind whipped wildly around the two, dragging Wilbur's hair every which way and making Techno's ponytail dance like a ribbon in the wind. He found himself thankful for his glasses so that he didn't have to squint against the wind to watch as the colours of the sky softened into hues of pink and orange.

Everything about this felt like the calm before the storm.

“I just don’t understand where you got all those connections from,” Wilbur finally replied. “What makes you so sure that there’s any link between Haywire and Schlatt in the first place? Did Tubbo tell you something?”

He saw Techno shaking his head out of the corner of his eye. “No, it was Foolish. He said that the vigilante he was helping had all that information because he was an “unwilling accomplice” in Trigger’s creation. That’s why this is important enough to him to take such a huge risk with his identity.”

Ah. Well, that explained one thing.

“Okay, but what makes you so sure that Tubbo *is* Haywire then,” Wilbur pressed. “Haywire could have just recruited him as a helper because of his position with the police.”

“When I spoke to him in the coffee shop he didn’t deny it when I called him a vigilante or when I implied he was living with an abusive villain,” Techno answered. “I just didn’t realize he was Haywire until the presentation.”

Wilbur sighed. There was no denying it in that case, but it made something sick twist in his stomach. Tubbo seemed like a pretty cool kid, even though he had only met him a handful of times. He didn’t deserve this.

“Fuckin’ hell,” Wilbur cursed, pushing his glasses up to scrub a hand over his face. “That would mean that he’s been a vigilante since he was, what, fourteen?”

Next to him, Techno sighed. He leaned back on his hands and looked up at the colourful strokes of clouds across the sky above them. “I’d be willing to bet Theseus was the same age,” he said after a quiet moment.

Finally, Wilbur turned to look at his brother. They had never really rehashed that conversation about Theseus’s death. Both of them had been too busy and he was sure Techno would have shut it down anyway. Before he could find anything to say movement beyond Techno caught his eye.

Wilbur squinted at the figure approaching down the beach and found himself laughing in disbelief when he recognized them.

Techno turned to him with a confused expression before following his line of sight down the sand. “Oh for the love of—”

“Speak of the devil and he shall appear I suppose,” Wilbur chuckled.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re too smart for your own good kid?” Techno shouted over the buffeting wind.

“All the time, actually!” Tubbo yelled back as he closed the last few meters to where the brothers sat. “Though if it makes you feel any better you’re a hard man to find!”

Tubbo came to a stop only a few feet away from them and Wilbur couldn't help but internally grimace at what he saw. Whatever makeup he had been wearing earlier had been covering up a nasty collection of fading bruises across the left side of his face. Some of them were a sickly yellow in colour while others were so purple they were almost black, meaning he had taken a number of different beatings to accumulate the injuries.

Alarmingly he noticed some fresher wounds in the form of a barely scabbed over split lip and some scrapes and cuts across his forehead and the right side of his face. There was no way he could have hidden those with makeup, meaning he had somehow been injured in the few hours between the end of the meeting and now.

Beside him, Techno almost frowned as he spotted the new scrapes. "What happened to you?"

Tubbo half smiled, careful of his newly split lip. "I miscalculated," he said as he plopped down in the sand next to Techno. "That meeting was much bigger than I thought it would be. Three of the cops in that room were on Schlatt's payroll, two of them saw me."

Wilbur frowned. That was an unfortunate turn of events but it wouldn't be hard to figure out. However, that didn't quite explain why it was a problem for Tubbo. "Schlatt doesn't know that you go to Prime Academy?"

Tubbo glanced at him and shook his head. "No, he knows. But he also knows that there's no way Haywire could have gotten that level of information without some inside help. He might not have figured out that I'm a vigilante yet but he didn't need much of a push to put me on his shit list."

Techno snorted. "You mean he's been giving you those kinds of beatings without being on his shit list?"

The teen smiled bitterly at the horizon. "Yeah, he has. Now I'm just going to be the number one target for every mercenary and bounty hunter he knows. So this is my hail mary plan," he said, gesturing vaguely to the beach around them.

"What? Following us out to the coast to watch the sunset? I mean, it's definitely a great view, but I can't imagine how it'll solve any problems," Wilbur joked, hoping to lighten the kid's mood even a bit.

Tubbo huffed and shook his head. "As much fun as it was to get chased all over the city by gangsters while trying to track you guys down, the scenery isn't my only reason for finding you. Stupid as it may be, I think you two are the only heroes in the city I might consider even vaguely trusting."

Techno and Wilbur shared a surprised look before turning back to the young vigilante.

"And why is that?" Techno asked slowly. "You've never spoken to either of us before today."

Tubbo looked back over at them, mouth set in a serious line. "There's a lot of reasons, but I think the biggest ones have less to do with you and more to do with my options. I'll be honest, I know who you two are. Your dad, Tempest, used to be a vigilante. In his career as a

hero, Tempest still showcased a great deal of respect for other vigilantes and I can tell that he passed that on to you two. Both of you have a history of working with rogues and vigilantes in the interest of the greater good. You care more about the results than the laws you might have to break to get there.”

Wilbur scowled. “Well, when you put it like that it doesn’t make us sound like we’re very good at doing our jobs right.”

Techno snorted. “He’s not wrong though.”

“Another reason,” Tubbo continued, “is that both of your records show that you were placed in Prime Academy on government mandate. Neither of you set out in life with the goal of kissing the hero commission’s asses and the number of suspensions on your records proves it. Because of that, I’m hoping that both of you will probably be okay with a little bit of truth-bending when you use the information I give you.”

“So your last-ditch plan is to give us more information?” Wilbur asked in confusion. “That’s all?”

Tubbo huffed quietly, head turning back out towards the water. “For most of my life, Schlatt gave me a generous amount of freedom so long as I cooperated with him. He’s not going to tolerate that anymore after what I did today. I don’t know what exactly he’ll do with me, but I know it’s not gonna be good. So yeah, I’m going to give you *all* of the information and more ways to get what you’ll need.”

Techno and Wilbur shared another look. Something wasn’t quite adding up here.

It was something about Tubbo’s tone, about the resigned look on his face that set off the alarm bells in Wilbur’s head.

“You’re... you’re not planning on getting out of this alive, are you,” Wilbur asked sadly.

Tubbo met his gaze with a sad smile. “It’s the best play. Schlatt will lose a major asset and think that he cleaned up all of the loose ends. Meanwhile, you two still hold all the playing cards.”

He abandoned fiddling with his watch to unzip his heavy black jacket and reach into a hidden pocket. When his hand returned, it clutched a small silver box with a USB port and SD card slot visible along the side. An external harddrive.

“This harddrive contains everything. All of my files, my codes, my systems. Every advanced hack client I’ve ever created and all the passwords and back door key codes to every system I’ve ever accessed. I’ve organized it as well as I could with the time I had, but once you can find someone to navigate through it, there’s nowhere Schlatt can hide from you,” he said, expression rather melancholy. “This is the culmination of all of Haywire’s work. It’s the best I can do to help you finish this without me.”

He held it out to Techno, who gave the device a wary look as he gingerly accepted it. Techno turned to give Wilbur what would qualify as an alarmed look for him, though it wasn’t much

more than a furrowed brow and downturn of the lips.

As far as hail-mary plans went, this definitely qualified. Tubbo wasn't planning on coming back from this, so he was giving up all his secrets in one go just to throw Schlatt off the scent.

On the other side of Techno, the teen stood and brushed the sand off his pants. He turned to them with another half smile and gave a mocking salute. "It's been a pleasure working with you, gentlemen," he said before pivoting on his heels to walk back in the direction he came from.

Wilbur was on his feet in a second. "*Haywire, stop*," he commanded, pouring all of his powers into the words.

The reaction was immediate as Tubbo froze mid-stride. His shoulders dropped and he turned his head to look back at them. Behind Wilbur, Techno rose to his feet as well.

"Just let me go, Whisper," he said, voice strong and determined over the wild sounds of the wind.

"Let you go what? Walk to your death?" Techno asked, anger tinging the edges of his tone. "You've already been attacked once today and you think we can just let you go off on your own? Whether Schlatt catches you or you manage to get yourself killed, there's better options here."

The brothers closed the few steps it took to stand in front of the teen and were met with watery green eyes.

Tubbo laughed without a hit of humour. "I guess it was pretty naive of me to hope you guys wouldn't turn me in," he said, a single tear slipping down his bruised cheek.

"Tubbo I don't want to turn you in, but if it's the only way we can keep you safe from Schlatt and alive then I will," Wilbur said firmly. "Work with us to find another option or we take you right to Tempest's agency for protective custody while we work this out."

"What other options Whisper!" the teen suddenly shouted. "What is there to work out!? Schlatt knows who I am and everybody who ever worked with him can recognize my face! Either I leave now and try to get as far away from this city as I can before they realize I'm gone or you put me in jail and pray that he doesn't have an inside man that snatches me in the middle of the night.

"If I go anywhere else everyone around me would be at risk and it would only be a matter of time before the truth gets out. I'm living a fucking triple life here, this is how it was always going to end, so just let me go," he begged, chest heaving and his breathing picking up. "*Please*," he nearly sobbed when neither Techno nor Wilbur made any visible reaction to the outburst.

This... this was heartbreaking. Was this what Phil saw from the other side? Did twelve-year-old Wilbur sound this lost and hurt when he begged Phil to just let the villains take him back?

To stop wasting his time and energy on Wilbur because he believed it when people told him he was worthless?

How long had Schlatt had Tubbo to convince him that his life was worth so little? That trying to save him wasn't worth risking anything at all?

"Tubbo there are people who would be more than willing to take the risk involved to keep you safe," Wilbur said firmly. Tubbo opened his mouth to argue but Wilbur cut him off. "Your life is not worth a single harddrive's worth of information. You are a person who deserves the chance to have a real life, not a pawn to sacrifice in some game of chess—"

"You don't even know me!" he argued. "I *know* that nobody cares! You're saying that you care but all you're going to do is drop me on the next person who couldn't give less of a shit! I'm making the smart play—"

"*Tubbo!*" a distant voice interrupted from down the beach behind Wilbur and Techno. Wilbur started in surprise and turned to see three figures approaching down the beach. "*If your face wasn't already so messed up I'd slap the shit out of you for being such an idiot!*" the golden man in the hoodie called out.

Behind Wilbur, Tubbo sighed harshly. He turned to see Tubbo scrub his hands over his face, muttering something that was lost to the wind.

"Hey Guardian," Techno called out in greeting. "Any particular reason why are you hanging out with a rogue?" he asked as the group approached.

"I don't know Blade," Eret's unmistakable voice replied, "why are you hanging out with a vigilante?"

"Touché," Techno grumbled, stepping back in line with Tubbo and Wilbur as the new trio finally closed the distance.

Like Techno had said, two of the newcomers were in fact The Regal Hero, Guardian, adorned in casual clothes and sunglasses and a man in a shark hoodie that matched the description of the rogue Foolish. Their third member was a girl in a neon green hoodie with a white Dream mask covering her face, her blonde ponytail eerily unaffected by the wild movement of the wind.

Eret and Foolish came to a stop at a comfortable distance while the girl kept walking straight up to Tubbo. Before Wilbur realized what she was doing she had already smacked Tubbo on the less bruised side of his face and opened his split lip in the process.

"Do you know how much of an idiot you are? Because I don't think you do," she said in a tone that was far too serious for her young voice.

Tubbo held a hand over his now bleeding mouth and gave the girl a wide-eyed look of fear. "W-well I must be a much bigger idiot than I thought if someone had the balls to get you involved," he said, demeanour far weaker than his earlier resolve.

The girl scoffed and whipped around to walk back in the other direction, ponytail flicking aggressively behind her. She passed between Eret and Foolish and moved back down the beach, snapping her fingers and seemingly making a dog appear out of thin air. A second later she was throwing a large bone down the sand and the dog chased after it.

Wilbur stared at the scene, torn somewhere between wonder and horror. Could she just make anything appear at will?

Foolish continued on like nothing happened. “You had seven possible plans that all included checking in with someone,” he said to Tubbo in a scolding tone. “Instead you didn’t check in with *anyone* and the last time someone heard from you was six hours ago when Memoir realized the motorcycle crash on the highway was your bike. We called in every resource we had and found nothing so I had to resort to calling *Drista* of all people.”

“I’m sorry but—” Tubbo started, only to be cut off again.

“Do you have any idea how bad it will be if you get caught or die? Schlatt has enough resources to run circles around us for the next ten years without you to keep him in check. Nobody cares if you think you suddenly came up with a better plan because, whether any of us like it or not, you’re one of the smartest people alive with the critical thinking skills of a teenage boy. You can’t do this alone and I for one am not letting you get killed. Schlatt isn’t even the big picture I’m trying to deal with here, so don’t go sacrificing yourself for literally nothing.”

Tubbo stared at the man with wide eyes for a long moment before speaking. “Are you done?”

Foolish frowned at him. “That depends, do you still think that running off like this was a good choice?”

“No,” Tubbo said in an unsure tone, eyes flicking past the men in front of him to where the girl—Drista?—was now playing fetch with about twenty dogs.

“Are you saying that because you believe it? Or because you’re scared of Drista and Foolish?” Eret asked in a calm tone.

“Because I’m scared of Drista and Foolish,” Tubbo admitted immediately. “I seriously think you guys are overestimating my importance in this situation.”

“You’re underestimating yourself,” all four of the men said in unison, surprising Tubbo the most.

After a moment Tubbo groaned in defeat. “Fine, but in my defence, I didn’t skip out on the plans, they just all fell through so I couldn’t make contact with any of you.”

“There were still better options than fleeing the city and passing on all your info to two heroes you barely know,” Wilbur piped in. “We seriously could have just immediately arrested you.”

“Except that it was a highly calculated risk because I figured you wouldn’t and you didn’t,” Tubbo shot back, now looking more annoyed than chastised. “But what’s the plan now? Why did you get Guardian involved?” he questioned Foolish.

Foolish grinned, revealing a set of wicked looking razor-sharp teeth. “Because we’re going to play it so that Guardian becomes your new legal guardian. But it would be super awesome if Whisper and The Blade were up for helping out with that,” he said, looking between Wilbur and Techno. “What do you say, gentlemen? You’re already in this deep, either of you in the mood for going rogue in the name of the greater good?”

Wilbur looked over Tubbo’s head at his brother. They had a very short silent conversation that ended with Techno sighing and Wilbur snorting. Tubbo did have one thing right when he was considering their character as heroes: the results were always more important than the method of getting there.

“Yeah we’re in,” Wilbur laughed. “Like my father always says, there's nothing like a good bit of chaos to keep you on your toes—”

“He never says that—”

“— so what do you need us to do?”

Tommy would never admit it, but maybe he was starting to feel a little out of his depth.

Of course, he *could* handle it. He *was* handling it. He was a big man who was perfectly capable of taking care of himself, but maybe he was starting to feel a bit paranoid.

But was it really paranoia when you knew someone was after you? Where was the line between vigilance and plain fear when a gangster parked across the street from your current place of residence every night for the last week?

Tommy didn’t know what to do, and that’s what was really starting to get to him.

It was three am and he was sat at his bedroom window, looking down on the suburban streets below and watching the black sedan parked across the street. Every night around eleven o’clock it pulled up and parked in that exact same spot. Nobody ever left the vehicle, though every once and a while Tommy was sure that he saw the flicker of a lighter through the tinted windows. Then the next morning they left at five am. They had done it every night since Tommy and Ranboo ran into the mercenary last week.

How did Tommy know the sedan’s exact schedule? Well, one could say that he and sleep hadn’t been getting along recently. Or, they hadn’t the first night he was grounded and that’s when he spotted the vehicle the first time. He hadn’t been able to sleep well after that, knowing the house was being stocked.

He had no idea what to do about it.

Normally he would call another vigilante or rogue to help him figure it out, but that option was no longer on the table. Tommy knew what was going on but there was nothing he could do about it. The Network broke up and it's not like they could do anything against Schlatt's gang anyway.

The only other option was trying to tell the cops, except that was arguably worse. He could easily do it without revealing that he used to be a vigilante, but that wasn't the problem. If Tommy admitted that he had actively hid an unregistered power his entire life they would probably lock him up in a "protective facility" for the rest of his life. People didn't just get to go against the system and get away without consequences in the modern world.

Outside, he saw movement in the car and was unpleasantly surprised to see the driver's side door open. A man in a black suit and long coat stepped out into the cool night air and looked directly up at Tommy's window. Tommy shuddered and quickly reached to pull the curtains closed.

After a nerve-wracking moment, he leaned over to peek through the crack between the wall and curtains.

Outside the man was leaning back against his car, still looking up at Tommy's window. He must have been able to see Tommy watching because he smiled and shot a small salute his way as he pulled a pack of cigarettes and a lighter out of his pocket.

Too sleep-deprived to think better of it, Tommy stuck his hand through the curtain and flipped the man off. He saw the man's shoulders shake with laughter and the lighter in his hand sparked to life and he sheltered it from the wind to light his cigarette.

Tommy frowned but found he didn't want the man to leave his line of sight now that he was out of the car. What if Tommy looked away and he, like, broke into the house or something?

He found himself risking a glance back at the spot on his floor that had been recently vacated of an air mattress. He would never admit it out loud but he kind of missed having Ranboo here.

The week Ranboo had stayed over was one of the least stressful of Tommy's life based solely on the fact that he knew the two of them could handle literally anything together. Whether it was someone trying to kidnap Tommy, or if Phil suddenly turned evil, he knew Ranboo would have his back. Not that he would ever admit to that out loud. They both knew it and Tommy would rather die than say it.

He hoped Tubbo would be alright on his own too.

He said that the hero meeting was supposed to be sometime this week. Tommy hadn't seen anything on the news about them arresting Haywire but he wasn't sure if that was good or bad. For all Tommy knew, Schlatt could have caught Tubbo before he even got to the heroes.

Tommy blinked against the dry burning in his eyes and glared at the smoking criminal across the street. He had officially reached the point of sleep deprivation where his eyes hurt no

matter how often he blinked and his head felt like it was underwater any time he tried to move faster than a snail. It sucked.

But his exhaustion wasn't just physical either, Tommy had returned to the dreaded state where he was just so damn tired of *everything* .

The few weeks before Wilbur had to leave for his “work trip” had been significantly easier on Tommy than when he first woke up after his injuries. He had really started to enjoy hanging out with Wilbur and maybe started to let himself believe that Phil was as nice as he seemed. Then Wilbur lied to him and it was all downhill from there.

Wilbur somehow got past Tommy’s defences armed only with a relatable sob story, some kind words and attention. Then he turned out to be just as shady and untrustworthy as pretty much everyone Tommy had ever tried to trust. How pathetic was that? Tommy just never fucking learned.

Then there was Phil, who had sounded absolutely furious when he found Tommy and Ranboo missing, yet had spent the last week being kind and acting like very little had changed. Tommy had assumed that he was putting on a show for Ranboo but nothing happened even after Niki picked him up a few days ago. Was Phil as genuine as he seemed? Or was he waiting for something else to get mad at him for?

“Don’t ruin this for yourself,” Ranboo’s words echoed in the back of his treacherous mind.

Tommy scowled at the thought, mentally cursing his friend.

He wasn’t being dramatic. He wasn’t blowing things out of proportion. Wilbur lied and was obviously shady. Phil was mad, he was just hiding it. Tommy was pathetic for just sitting by and watching it all happen.

And that fucking guy outside wasn’t going to leave for another two hours.

He groaned and rested his head against the wall next to him. He squinted through the crack in the drapes at the stalker for as long as he could until the heaviness in his eyelids became too much to fight off.

Tommy sighed, some of the tension easing from his muscles despite himself. Resting his eyes for a minute wouldn’t do any harm. The man had just lit a second cigarette and didn’t seem to be going anywhere. It was probably safe enough to just bask in the darkness for a moment.

He jerked violently back into awareness at the feeling of a hand closing on his shoulder.

Tommy flinched at the contact and his hand darted out to catch his assailant's wrist, throwing their light touch away from him as though it burned. He blinked painfully against the blur in his vision until the other person finally came into focus, now standing a good few feet away from him.

Somehow Phil had come here without Tommy noticing.

“I’m sorry,” Tommy rasped automatically. Phil was mad at him, Phil was going to be so mad that Tommy just grabbed him like that—

“No, no, no mate. *I’m* sorry,” Phil interrupted his racing thoughts, hands raised placatingly. “I’m sorry I touched you without permission. I was just worried. You’ve been asleep all day and you weren’t answering the door when I knocked.”

Tommy blinked wearily, head still foggy. *Asleep all day?* He repeated the phrase in his head a few times before it registered. His bedroom was lit by the soft light of the half-set sun, not the ominous glow of his bedside clock.

Tommy had fallen asleep. He had been asleep *all day*.

“Shit,” he muttered as he rubbed a hand over his face as though he could wipe away his exhaustion. All that sleep and he still felt like crap.

“Tommy, are you feeling alright?” Phil asked in a gentle tone. “You didn’t fall asleep there last night, did you?” His expression would probably be best described as concerned. But was he really concerned?

“No,” Tommy blatantly lied as he tried to ignore the painful crick in his neck. “I’m fine. Is there a reason you needed to wake me up?” he asked, trying to change the subject.

Phil gave him a skeptical look before he sighed lightly. “Wilbur and Techno are coming to stay for the weekend. They’re picking up takeout on the way home and wanted to know your order.”

Oh. So Wilbur was done with his shady business. Tommy wasn’t really sure how he felt about that.

“Where are they stopping?” he asked as he slowly pushed to his feet, trying not to show just how much he ached from sleeping next to his window for what— he glanced at the clock— *sixteen hours*? Jesus. That stalker could have burnt down the house and Tommy would’ve been none the wiser.

“Your choice, they can grab anything you’d like,” Phil replied.

Tommy rolled his shoulders a few times as he tried to get his brain working again. Not long after he accepted he wasn’t gonna think of anything and shrugged. “I don’t care what they get,” he grumbled. “I’m just gonna take a shower.”

Phil studied him for a moment longer, his wings shifting slightly behind him. He nodded. “Alright, they’ll probably be here within the next half hour. And since you’re grounded, I’m afraid you’ll have to suffer through eating with us.”

Tommy tensed as he dug through his dresser for a fresh set of clothes. One of Phil’s rules for being grounded was eating in the dining room or kitchen. Shit.

“I’m sorry for missing breakfast and lunch,” he said nervously.

Phil paused in the doorway, looking back at Tommy with that weird look of concern. “It’s fine mate. While I’d prefer you eat at least twice a day, you obviously needed the sleep more. Don’t worry about it.”

Tommy risked a glance at him and was both relieved and confused to find no traces of anger in Phil’s body language. He nodded and Phil gave him a somewhat awkward smile before exiting into the hall.

Tommy wouldn’t say that his shower was relaxing, but he didn’t feel quite as awful as he stepped out into the steamy room.

As he towelled off and pulled on some fresh clothes he found himself unconsciously searching the tiles and walls for any evidence of bloodstains. He had practically bled out on the floor here a couple months ago yet he couldn’t find any sign of it. Apparently one of the Watsons knew a thing or two about cleaning up blood.

Great. That wasn’t strange or suspicious at all.

Still feeling like death warmed over, he made his way downstairs. As he walked he found himself instinctively trying to silence his footsteps, something he had almost stopped doing until recently.

He reached the second floor and paused in the foyer when he could hear hushed voices from the kitchen.

“—fall asleep next to the window?” came Techno’s deep timbre.

“I don’t know,” Phil sighed. “He and Ranboo snuck out last week and ever since they came back something’s been off. I asked Tommy if he would tell me and he just refused and didn’t even try to lie. When we got home it was pretty obvious that they had both been crying, so whatever it was I think it might be pretty serious.”

Tommy found himself grimacing. Phil hadn’t said anything when he picked them up so he thought he got away without the man noticing. Stupid Ranboo and his weak emotions, he knew Tommy could be a sympathetic crier.

“Phil, why would you just let it go if you could tell it was that serious?” Wilbur asked. “You *never* let me get away with that shit.”

“It’s different Will,” Phil said. “I just— he’s not you, and you know that. I thought that maybe it was just teen drama but I don’t—” he sighed. “I don’t know what to think.”

There was a long pause before Wilbur spoke again. “I know he’s not me, and thank god for that, but I’m still worried about him.”

“Fat load of good your worrying will do if he’s still mad at you,” Techno commented dryly.

“Oh piss off. Even if he suddenly decided to hate me I’d still be worried. He deserves to have people care about what’s going on with him. All these poor kids do.”

Tommy's exhausted brain simply short-circuited.

They didn't even know that he was standing there, yet they were still talking about him like they were worried. Hell, Wilbur had just said the words '*I'm worried about him*'. There was no audience, nobody to pretend for, and they had bluntly just said that they cared about Tommy's well being.

What the fuck was going on. Was he still asleep?

After that, the conversation shifted away from the topic of Tommy but he was still frozen, trying to process.

Was he really looking for problems that weren't there? Was Ranboo right when he said Tommy was ruining this for himself? People had said they cared about him before, but it was always when he was there or there was someone to perform for. All of them had gone back on that, leading him to look for the worst in people out of habit.

But if they said it not to his face, just to each other in a private conversation, why would it be a lie? Tommy had really landed in the luckiest placement he ever could have and was making himself miserable looking for problems that weren't there.

Phil was worried about him. Wilbur *cared* about him. Holy shit.

"Maybe I should go make sure he didn't pass out in the shower or anything," Phil said, breaking Tommy out of his stupor.

As Phil's footsteps approached Tommy silently backed up to the stairs and made a noisy show of back stomping down them. He rounded the corner again just in time to run into Phil in the doorway of the sitting room.

Phil blinked in surprise and smiled gently at him. "Oh, hey mate. I was just coming to check on you. Feeling a bit better?"

Tommy stuffed his hands in his hoodie pocket and shrugged. "A bit," he replied, stepping around Phil to move back towards the kitchen.

As he passed by the couches Tommy picked up the smallest of the decorative pillows and gripped it lightly in his right hand. Through the entryway to the kitchen, he could see Wilbur leaning forward with his hands on the counter and back to the door. Seeing that both his hands were empty Tommy drew back his arm to throw the pillow.

"Hey *dickhead*," he punctuated the insult by nailing the man in the head with the pillow, "how was your two weeks as an '*investigative journalist*'?" he asked, making air quotes with his fingers.

Wilbur grunted as the pillow struck him. He rubbed at the side of his head and turned a hurt look on Tommy.

Behind him, Phil sighed. "Tommy, be *nice*," he admonished.

On the other side of Wilbur, Techno snatched the pillow out of the air, saving it from knocking over the collection of soft drinks on the counter. “Why’d you say investigative journalist with air quotes?” he asked, tossing the pillow back into the sitting room.

This time Wilbur sighed. “Because he doesn’t believe that that’s my job. Which *it is* , by the way,” he said, glaring half-hearted at Tommy for emphasis.

It definitely wasn’t, as far as Tommy could tell, but obviously Wilbur wasn’t going to admit it.

Tommy tutted and shook his head. “No, no, no, my lanky friend,” he started in a silly tone, “I said it like that because everybody knows that investigative journalists aren’t *real* , just like *birds* or Canadians.”

Techno promptly choked on his pop and burst into a painful coughing fit. A moment later the joke finally landed on Phil and Wilbur, who both tried in vain to muffle their laughter. Eventually, Wilbur stopped trying to fight it and nearly doubled over as his laughter got stronger.

Tommy couldn’t help the small grin that grew on his face at that. He’d never had a family that found his absurdist humour very entertaining.

“Did ya hear that Phil,” Techno said in a strangled tone after he caught his breath. “Birds aren’t real, they all—” he cut himself off with a laugh, unable to finish his own joke.

“*Canadians*, ” Wilbur wheezed as he wiped away the tears in his eyes. “What the fuck,” he laughed.

“Okay, okay, let’s not—” Phil started only for Tommy to cut him off.

“No Phil, it’s simply true, birds aren’t real—”

Wilbur and Techno fell into a second round of laughter and Tommy couldn’t help but join them this time. Phil somehow managed to look simultaneously amused and annoyed at the bird jokes.

“Alright,” Phil chuckled, reaching for the unopened bag of takeout on the counter. He slid foil-wrapped burritos across the granite counter in their directions as he spoke. “Just eat your dinner you little gremlins,” he said with a teasing grin.

Chapter End Notes

Eret? Drista?? Dude stalking Tommy??? What's happening!?

Um but on a more serious note my hand is kinda messed up so as much as I don't want to, I think I have to take a break from writing. Like writing the notes on this chapter was

low-key painful so I have to save what little I've got for school work :(((

I'll keep trying to post the pre-written chapters but I honestly shouldn't have even worked on this one. Fingers crossed for my nerves to chill the heck out I guess.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed!

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Techno helps Tommy with homework.

The Warden opens a new investigation.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the lovely comments and a huge thanks to my Beta <3

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A hopeless groan from the dining room followed the quiet clink of the coffee pot being replaced into the machine.

Techno picked up his mug and paused as he passed the entryway. Inside Tommy was sitting with his head down on the table's polished wooden surface, completely ignoring the open computer in front of him. On the table next to him was Phil's copy of *The Odyssey*.

Techno couldn't help but be a little sympathetic to the situation. He had spent his fair share of time as a teenager doing the exact same thing when he was grounded. School sucked, especially if you hadn't been doing it consistently your whole life.

"L." He said to the suffering teenager. Just because he could sympathize didn't mean it wasn't kind of funny to watch from the other side.

"Fuck you," he grumbled without moving.

"Hmmm, pass."

Tommy sighed deeply as he sat up. For a moment he glared at his computer before shooting Techno a rather miserable look. "You wouldn't happen to be any good at English, would you?" he asked.

Techno considered how to answer for a moment.

On one hand, Tommy seemed smart enough to figure it out eventually. Plus he was doing homework in the dining room as a technical punishment for sneaking out, so maybe he

shouldn't intervene.

On the other hand, Phil had pointed out that Techno hadn't been around enough to get to know the kid. If he did help it could probably qualify as an attempt at bonding or whatever. Phil would at least appreciate the effort, even if they never end up clicking quite the same as Wilbur and Tommy had.

Techno shrugged. "It was the only class I didn't need a tutor for, so yeah."

Tommy raised an eyebrow as Techno moved into the room to sit next to him.

"You had to have tutors for *everything else*?" he said incredulously.

Techno rolled his eyes, taking a sip of his coffee and he sat down. "You don't have to say it like *that*. I didn't start doing standardized school until I was twelve, I was just behind."

"You didn't do school until Phil took you in?" Tommy asked, tilting his head curiously. "Why?"

Techno fixed him with a solid stare. "Did you want help with English or not?"

Tommy managed to hold his gaze for a moment before he groaned dramatically and face-planted back into the table. "I would much rather talk about your mysterious and jaded past actually."

Techno snorted. "Tell you what, we finish your homework and then we can play twenty questions."

"What's twenty questions?" the teen said flatly, rolling his head to the side with an unimpressed expression.

"It's this awful game where you take turns asking questions about each other," Techno answered. He was pretty sure that wasn't how the game was actually played but whatever.

"Oh god that sounds horrible," Tommy said as he drug himself up off the table again.

"Yeah, makes English homework sound like more fun, huh?"

Tommy scoffed. "Only marginally."

The homework itself ended up being simple enough to figure out. It was a literary commentary on the use of adapting classical stories into new media. For some ungodly reason, Tommy had chosen the movie "*Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?*" and *The Odyssey* by Homer.

The problems ended up being Tommy's attention span and Techno's patience.

"Why didn't you choose something easier like *Twelfth Night* and that soccer movie?" Techno grumbled as they went over his essay outline for the third time. Trying to explain the nuanced significance of which scenes were included in the adaptation and which weren't was starting to feel like chewing glass.

“Do I look like someone who could read Shakespeare for fun?” Tommy snarked.

“You say that like you look like someone that could read Homer for fun. Maybe you should settle for someone in the middle like *Voltaire*,” Techno shot back sarcastically.

Tommy sighed harshly and slammed his notebook closed, tossing it down on the table across from them. “Fuckin’ whatever man. It’s not due for a few more days anyway.”

“Good, cause this sucks,” Techno muttered, mostly to himself.

For a moment they sat in tense silence, both just trying to stamp down the burnout and annoyance that the hour of homework had caused.

“Why didn’t you go to school until you were twelve?” Tommy asked again, hands fidgeting as he started to build a small tower out of erasers and pen caps.

Techno gave his empty coffee cup a mournful look. He didn’t exactly promise that he’d answer Tommy’s questions but this wasn’t the worst opportunity to chat. Wilbur and Phil seemed pretty set on keeping the kid around so he may as well just accept it.

“Grew up in a cult,” he said casually. “Why don’t you know the basics of literary devices when you’re studying such high-level English?”

Tommy stopped building his tower just long enough to give Techno a bewildered look. After a moment he turned back to it and answered. “I missed most of school last year but I switched so many times that they just let me pass. What kind of cult only teaches you middle school English?”

Techno gave the table a bitter smile. “They didn’t teach me anything aside from how to fight. I just happened to really like reading in my free time. Why did you miss so much school?”

Tommy fiddled with an extra eraser for a moment before speaking. “Kept getting suspended and expelled for fighting. Then I switched to online and never went back,” he replied. “How did you get out of the cult?”

“Heroes took down the cult and decided I could be rehabilitated with some elbow grease,” Techno said after a minute. “You get into fights a lot?”

“Unfortunately,” Tommy muttered. He flicked his stationary tower down and began to collect all the pieces into different piles. “Was adjusting to living here weird?”

Techno snorted. “Very. Do you like fighting?”

Tommy started to restack the tower in a different order this time. “Sometimes. I like sparing or respectful brawls, but not when people are being dicks or trying to kill me.”

The tower tipped over as one of the pen caps in the middle shifted and it all tumbled down. Both of them stared at the wreckage until Techno decided Tommy wasn’t going to ask any more questions.

He glanced at the teen to find him seeming deep in thought. Tommy leaned back in his chair, eyes still trained on the pile of erasers as he started to bite at the skin on his lower lip, brows furrowing.

Either he was thinking hard about something Techno had said or he was spiralling into memories about fights he didn't like. Neither were ideal ways to end their interaction.

"Do you want to spar?" Techno asked after a moment. "I've always found it's a nice way to blow off steam after shitty homework sessions."

Tommy took a deep breath and blew out a stream of air through pursed lips, his cheeks puffing out as he did. After a bit, he broke into a tired laugh and nodded.

"That sounds like an awesome idea," he said with a small grin. "Too bad I'll have to go easy on you."

Techno couldn't help but chuckle at the thought. "Throw as much as you want at me kid, I think I can take it."

Apparently, there were sparring mats in a closet on the ground floor. Tommy wished he had known that when Ranboo was still here because they could have killed hours of boredom after getting grounded.

Techno showed him where the grey mats were and how to easily move the couch so there was enough floor space for a decent stretch of open mat. As they were making sure all the mats were correctly arranged Tommy considered what approach he should go into this with.

The main problems he was encountering were that he had no idea how well-trained Techno actually was and that Tommy himself hadn't thrown a single punch in just over two months. Eventually, he decided to just start very slow and work up either to where he was comfortable or his skills surpassed Technos'.

The man was apparently raised in some sort of fighting-based cult so hopefully he was somewhere near Tommy's level.

"Start at whatever level you're comfortable with and I'll match you," Techno said confidently as they stepped onto the mat. "Have you had any kind of formal training other than jiu-jitsu? Ranboo said that's how you two met."

Tommy's eyebrows raised in surprise. He found it hard to believe Techno bothered to remember that, considering this was the longest they had ever spent time together.

"Uh, yeah. I've done a little bit of everything here and there. I've done some wrestling, taekwondo, tai-chi, boxing and judo lessons but I've also done some private practice with mixed martial arts guys."

Techno looked almost impressed. "That's quite the range," he said.

Tommy shrugged. “Every foster that decided martial arts was a good idea to discipline me just picked a new one. I found the MMA guys on my own though.”

Techno nodded. “Any other sports? Just so I’m not surprised if you do something weird.”

Tommy tilted his head as he thought about that. It was pretty forward-thinking of Techno to consider all these factors, so Tommy figured he probably knew what he was doing. That was good.

“I’ve done a ton of gymnastics and parkour which helps out with the MMA sometimes but I don’t think I really want to go that hard right now. I’ve also done, like, basketball and football but those probably won’t be an issue,” he chuckled.

“Well, it probably just means that you know how to follow through on a kick, but yeah. Like I said, you set the pace. I have lots of training in all of those forms so I think we’ll be okay,” Techno replied as he tied his hair back in a low ponytail.

He moved to set his glasses down a safe distance away and came back to the centre of the mat. Techno slowly shifted into a defensive stance and nodded at Tommy. “Your move,” he said evenly.

Tommy couldn’t help the slight feeling of trepidation that began to creep into him at the sight. Techno already moved like someone with a great sense of muscle control, but seeing that he was a trained fighter was unnerving.

Logically Tommy knew that there were plenty of people with pink hair, it was a sign of distant piglin hybrid traits that lots of people still had. However, his brain couldn’t help but equate the man’s physical prowess and long hair to a certain hero that he never liked to fight.

It was fine. Techno wasn’t The Blade. Tommy controlled the pace here.

So he started very slow.

It was like a dance, learning one another’s style and limits. Tommy started out with easy redirection of energy movements, asking Techno to throw the first hit so he could just warm up to the idea of sparring with him.

They traded back and forth with side-stepping and tactical shoving before Tommy made the move into blocking hits. Eventually, they fell into a silent rhythm, no longer needing to talk when Tommy changed the pace.

It was nice after he got over his hesitance. It didn’t take long for Tommy to determine that Techno definitely had more experience and training than he did, but that checked out. If he was only taught how to fight growing up, and continued to use it in an outlet like sparring through his teen years, obviously he’d have more skill than Tommy.

It was strange though. As they fought and started to increase the speed and level, Techno matched him perfectly. It was like sparring with Tubbo, who, after knowing each other for so many years, could match each other’s styles with their eyes closed.

Eventually, Tommy reached a comfortable level where he wasn't exerting too much energy or showing off too much of his full vigilante skills. Techno seemed perfectly content and continued to be mostly defensive, only throwing a soft attack when he was sure Tommy was paying attention.

As they danced around one another Tommy could feel the rush of energy that came with a good spar. A lot of his general anxiety and tension from the last few weeks started to drain away for just a few minutes as he managed to trip Techno up and send him falling towards the floor.

Techno took it with grace and turned the fall into a dive roll. He looked up at Tommy with a smile ghosting on his lips. "Rude."

Tommy grinned. "Well, you were already letting me beat you up out of pity so I figured you probably wouldn't mind."

Techno huffed. "I'll show you pity, brat," he said before suddenly lunging for Tommy's legs.

Tommy could only laugh as Techno skillfully tackled him to the mats and they started to grapple for control.

He had missed sparring. He missed doing stuff with his day and having time in his life where he could be carefree. The last couple of months had somehow been the safest yet most stressful as he struggled to find where he fit into the Watson household's dynamic on top of all his other problems. But this was something he knew, something he had forgotten he needed.

After a bit of messing around, Techno managed to pin Tommy in a way that he couldn't escape without hurting one of them. Finally, he yielded with the proper amount of shouting and cursing, which surprisingly made the man chuckle.

"Not bad, kid," Techno said as he sat up to release Tommy from his gentle stranglehold. "You're definitely far above the average man's skill level. Hell, you could probably give Wilbur a run for his money with a bit more practice."

Tommy tilted his head curiously at that. "I've beat Wilbur a few times already though?"

Techno shook his head, "He'd never go all out in roughhousing against someone he doesn't know has training. But kudos for the time you took his phone, you definitely caught him off guard there."

Tommy couldn't help but preen a little bit at the praise. "Well of course I did, Wilbur's just a bitch and *I'm* a big man."

That made Techno roll his eyes but Tommy could sense the fondness in the action. "Right, sure you are."

"Oi, you wanna go another round tough guy? I'll fuckin' prove it to ya!" Tommy wouldn't of course. Techno would probably be able to match his highest level of friendly sparring and

Tommy didn't really want either of them to get hurt by turning it into a real fight.

"No way," Techno said, pushing to his feet. "You're way too big of a man for me to go multiple rounds with, I'll take the L."

Tommy laughed and accepted Techno's offered hand that pulled him to his feet.

"Mats go away in the same closet, couch goes back to where it was," Techno instructed. "You're welcome to use them any time and if you ever really need a sparring partner and I'm not around, both Wilbur and Phil can hold their own at your level. Just make sure to tell them everything you've trained in so that they know."

Tommy nodded in acknowledgement as he moved to help fold up the mats. He didn't miss the way that Techno implied he could always go to him first when he needed a sparring partner. The thought made him want to smile.

He liked sparring with Techno, it was low stakes and comfortably familiar in a way that no new sparring partner had ever been. He wouldn't mind making it a regular thing.

They cleaned up with a relatively low level of banter and headed back upstairs to get some water and make lunch.

"Um, thanks, by the way," Tommy found himself awkwardly saying as Techno moved about the kitchen, making food. Techno glanced at him with a questioning look that made Tommy fidget with the strings on his hoodie. "For, uh, helping me with my homework," he clarified. "And for sparring with me, it was, uh— it was pretty fun actually."

"Uh, yeah. Any time, I guess," Techno replied awkwardly, not looking up from where he was prepping food on the cutting board.

Tommy's instincts told him to tease the man for being socially awkward, but he resisted since it would be hypocritical and possibly ruin the little bond they had just developed.

Techno didn't find Tommy unbearably annoying and Tommy was no longer completely freaked out by the mysteriously intimidating man. It was enough of a win for the day.

Not long after Phil joined them, curious to see the two hanging out alone for the first time since Tommy had joined the household. The awkwardness steadily abated as Phil led the conversation, curiously inquiring about Tommy's interests in martial arts and asking if he would like to start up lessons anywhere.

Tommy couldn't help the little spark of warmth in his chest that the offer created. For once he didn't have any fear in telling a foster parent about his interests. He also couldn't find it in himself to be worried that Phil might take back his offer of lessons and said he'd have to think about it.

It was amazing how in just over two months, Tommy felt so at home here. He found himself thinking back to Wilbur's warning that Tommy's negative feelings wouldn't just go away, that some days were better than others. Today was definitely a better day, but for the first

time, he found himself considering how to tell Phil that not every day was this comfortable for him.

He'd think about it some more. For now, he just wanted to enjoy the good day while it was here.

Sam was starting to regret not bringing backup.

Of course, in his defence, it hadn't seemed like a mission that warranted much of a response. A week ago The Blade had caught him on patrol and asked if he had any time to look into a weird rumour that had been going around the underworld. Sam had taken a look at the vague list of information and agreed, figuring it wouldn't take more than an hour.

It had already been three hours of wandering deeper and deeper into the maze of sewers, abandoned subway tracks and strange unmapped catacombs under the city and The Warden was lost. He had started out following the strange crimson weeds that were starting to pop up in some of the less used subway platforms, and the deeper he went the thicker the vines got and the more strange foliage started to appear.

If he suddenly ran into trouble now, there would be no way for backup to find him in time. Of course, he had the last-ditch plan of fleeing to the nether portal with his portable prototype, but that ran the chance of being just as dangerous if not more so.

He had tried to rationalize what was happening at first. Perhaps the plants were somehow a new invasive species that had been polluted with toxins or magic to make them so strange. There didn't seem to be any link to the so-called "egg" that was mentioned in the notes and he had no idea how some strange vines could become a city-level threat. Then he went even deeper, the vines got bigger and the flowers and mushrooms grew weirder.

Slowly he started to spot dead animals half-rotten underneath the plants in the now fully overgrown tunnels. A few dozen more meters and the dead rats and raccoons started to turn into the skeletal remains of creepers and endermen alongside completely still skeletons collapsed on top of their bows. Every bit of common sense in his body told him that it was dangerous here and he needed to leave, but something whispered in his mind to *keep going*.

Ahead the tunnels reached a crossroads, but the tunnel straight though and to the left were both blocked off by woven walls of vines.

Sam's pace slowed as he tried to convince himself that the dead-end was a sign to turn around, yet his feet kept moving towards the right turn at the tunnel's convergence.

His jaw was starting to ache from how hard he was clenching his teeth. The air inside his gas mask was becoming suffocating as gunpowder smoke built up in the respirator. *Take it off*, his mind whispered, so he did.

Despite how complicated it was to undo the locking mechanism on the straps, some part of him was urged to do it. However the second the mask was gone Sam was hit with the *smell*.

The pungent odour in the air left the rank taste of iron and gunpowder in his mouth. The air was uncomfortably humid and tasted like rot and blood as it choked through his sinuses. Within seconds a painful pressure began to build up behind his eyes and he grimaced.

The tension in his head quickly spiked as a cacophonous imitation of a voice made every muscle in his body scream.

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Sam gasped as the pain receded but left his ears ringing in the ominous silence. His chest heaved as he forced himself to calm down. This wasn't the time or place to lose his cool.

"Hello?" he called out, voice cracking as he choked on the taste of blood in his mouth. All of this was *wrong, wrong, wrong*.

“Warden?” a familiar voice cut through the suffocating quiet, echoing off of the little bits of exposed stone left in the tunnels.

Sam blinked. No, that didn't make any sense. "Captain?" he shouted back. Nobody else was down here, no other heroes knew about this case.

The sound of careful footsteps reached his ears and a moment later Puffy appeared around the next corner in the tunnels. She was decked out in her full hero gear, familiar red coat, pirate hat, sunglasses and all. The only difference was that her netherite armour pieces, usually painted to match her costume, were glowing in the low light with fresh enchantments. Where could she have even gotten them enchanted?

“Warden, what are you doing here?” The Captain asked as she approached, corners of her mouth downturned in confusion. “Nobody’s supposed to know about this place.”

“Supposed to know— what? Blade asked me to investigate— Puffy, what *is* this place?” he panted desperately as the pain behind his eyes persisted. “What’s going on here?”

The sheep hybrid sighed and shook her head. “The Blade— of course, why not?” she muttered, though it seemed like it was mostly to herself.

“Puffy *what is this* ,” he tried again. He was becoming more and more aware that he should be scared, that he *was* scared, but for some reason, his body wasn’t feeling it.

"It's—" she sighed again. "It'll just be easier to show you," she said, turning and carefully stepping around the thicker plants that were taking over the floor. "Follow me."

Before Sam could even decide whether or not that was a good idea, he was already moving after the other hero.

Puffy led him even deeper into the tunnels, past the deepest part of the sewers and into the catacombs under the city. The deeper they went, the thicker the smell of death became and the more feral the vines were. Finally, they turned a corner and the faint sound of more voices coming from the lit cavern at the end of the tunnel reached him.

Despite his common sense screaming at him to run before it was too late he followed Puffy out of the tunnels and into the cavern. Even with his trance-like urge to follow The Captain, he paused at the mouth of the tunnel just to marvel at how nightmarish the scene before him was.

The cavern was so large that he could barely see the far walls through the thick curtains of vines draping from the ceiling. The space was lit entirely by orange and yellow glowing mushrooms and small pools of lava. The scent of blood and rot was so strong here it was like trying to breathe in a rancid soup. And the centrepiece of it all stood at nearly twice his height, an ominous-looking ball of plant material and hard mineral substance in an oblong shape.

So *that's* why they called it The Egg.

“What the fuck,” he couldn’t help but say out loud, drawing the attention from the four other occupants of the room.

“Warden!” Onyx called in a cheery tone that had no business being in this setting. “I’m so glad you could make it! I can see that The Egg was calling out to you, wasn’t it?”

Sam stared in a mixture of abject horror and utter confusion at the five heroes as he moved further into the room. Onyx, Zirconius, Permafrost, Refractz and The Captain, all standing in a casual semi-circle just like they had with Scarlet Thorn at the huge briefing two weeks before. The biggest difference was their obviously glowing red eyes.

Something was very wrong.

“What— what the hell is this? What do you guys think you’re doing?”

“Well,” Zirconius replied, “we were just arguing over how to kill this kid we just caught. We left him alone with The Egg for a few hours but he hasn’t cracked, so we have to get rid of him.”

Puffy was the only one to react. “What?” she gasped. “Kill a kid— we’re still heroes! We can’t just go around killing people!”

The four men gave her a series of flat looks before looking to each other to silently confer.

“No offence Captain,” Refractz started, pushing the white hood of his cape back as he spoke, “but you’re the only one here who’s never killed a villain in the line of duty. I know it may seem weird, but most heroes do sometimes kill people one way or another.”

“But we don’t kill kids! What the hell!” she argued immediately. “What kid did you catch anyway? Why can’t we just let him go?”

Zirconius shrugged. “He was wandering around half asleep in the lower sewers and Scarlet caught him. We have to get rid of him because if he can’t learn to love The Egg, he’s a threat. I hope that you’re not trying to be a threat right now Captain,” he said in a suddenly dark

tone. “We wouldn’t want to have to get rid of you too.” His unnerving red eyes narrowed on her and Puffy took a step back towards Sam.

“Of course I’m not a threat to the egg,” she said in an almost offended tone. “I brought The Warden here, didn’t I? You said we needed more people to protect it, so I got more people.”

Sam blinked but forced himself not to react. Puffy had just run into him by accident though... hadn’t she?

Zirconius frowned, glowing eyes shifting to look at Onyx. The two seemed to share a silent conversation before Onyx nodded.

“Well then, you should understand that we have to do this,” Onyx said with a newly serious tone. “Permafrost, can you go retrieve our little sleepwalker?”

Permafrost’s tail flicked as he nodded and moved in the direction of the giant Egg.

Suddenly feeling far more nervous and in control of himself, Sam slowly moved to replace his gas mask. He shot a skeptical look Puffy’s way. She seemed against killing the kid, but all for helping The Egg. The Warden would have no choice but to try and save the kid, but what would The Captain do?

Puffy turned so that her face was angled away from the other and she removed her sunglasses. She pulled a cloth from her coat to wipe them clean as her eyes raised to meet Sam’s. Unlike all the other heroes already present her eyes were a clear blue with no sign of red in sight.

Oh thank the gods.

At least he had a little bit of backup now.

A minute later the cat hybrid returned, dragging a very scared-looking, very tall teenager at sword point.

The half enderman hybrid was clad in an oversized Tempest t-shirt and a pair of blue flannel pajama pants that clashed with green and red eyes and his half black, half white body. His eyes were wide with fear as he took in the six pro heroes surrounding him and a single tear slipped down his face, burning a small trail down the dark skin.

“Please don’t kill me,” he begged in a weak voice. “I— it was an accident— I was sleepwalking I don’t even know where we *are* —”

He was cut off as Permafrost roughly shoved him to the ground. In front of him, Sam noticed Puffy’s whole body go rigid as her hand slowly gravitated towards her axe. Sam slowly rested a hand on the pommel of his sword as Onyx sighed.

“Sorry, kid,” he said, tone almost remorseful. “This isn’t personal, it’s just business.” He raised the heavily enchanted trident in his hand but Puffy moved first.

Sam didn't wait to see Puffy block Onyx's attack as he found himself lunging to defend the teenager from Permafrost's frozen sword. The second their blades met ice began to coat The Warden's blade and he abandoned it, letting it fall to the floor to keep the ice away from his hands. He reached into his utility belt for a small fire charge to try and drive the ice hero back.

As he was distracted, Zirconius made yet another attack against the enderman hybrid, forming two red diamond spikes across his arms and lunging at the kid. The Warden cried out a warning, unable to intervene and was shocked when the teen made a move of his own.

The boy ducked low and lunged towards The Diamond Hero, getting inside his guard and somehow avoiding the razor-sharp spikes. The teen stood up fast, slamming his forehead into the hero's unprotected face with an audible crunch. Zirconius cried out and stumbled away from the boy, clutching at his bloody nose and swearing like a sailor.

The Warden set off his fire charge, effectively repelling Permafrost's next attack and driving Refractz away from the cluster. Behind him, he heard Onyx yelp as the Captain hopefully injured him.

Sam spotted the teen making a break for the nearest tunnel and reached into his arsenal for a larger weapon.

"Captain! Mid-GE!" he shouted in warning as he readied the mid-grade explosive. Sadly because they were fighting other heroes who had all worked with The Warden a number of times, Onyx and Permafrost reacted as quickly as she did.

The Warden aimed the explosive in Refractz's general direction, knowing that he had the best chance of defending while also being the biggest threat to their escape. The explosion went off just as he covered his ears. The shock wave was enough to knock both Zirconius and Onyx off their feet while Permafrost and Refractz used their powers to create defensive barriers.

It was just enough of an opening for The Captain and The Warden to *run like hell*.

As they sprinted for the same exit the pajama-clad teen had escaped through, Sam could see the shadows around them beginning to react to Onyx's powers. Just as he was about to warn Puffy he heard Bad gasp behind them and the shadows settled. "Skeppy! Are you okay?!"

"I'm fine dummy! They're getting..." the rest of the sentence was lost to Sam as they ducked through the vines and back into the rank tunnels.

They sprinted through the straight shot of blocked off tunnels but saw no sign of the teen. Not long after they reached the more open section of the lower sewer maze with no signs of pursuit at all. They paused at the first cross roads, looking for any clues to where the boy might have gone.

"Ranboo!" Puffy shouted into the tunnels when they found nothing. "Ranboo where are you?!"

“Puffy?” came the distant echo of a shout down the tunnel to their left.

Without hesitation, both heroes sprinted in the direction.

“Ranboo, stay where you are!” Puffy called out as they ran.

“Okay!” the teen replied, voice already sounding closer.

Sam panted, checking over their shoulder again to watch for any signs of the red-eyed heroes. When he found nothing, he turned back to Puffy.

“You know the kid?” he panted as they hit a dead end and had to double back.

“He’s the kid Nix’s been fostering,” Puffy replied. “He doesn’t know about the hero gigs but he must have recognized my voi— Ranboo!” she cried as they spotted him crouched nervously at the junction on one of the tunnels.

Ranboo fixed them with a wary and confused expression before hesitantly replying.

“Puff...y?”

The Captain removed her sunglasses and ran to drop in a crouch in front of the teen. “Dude, what the heck?!” she scolded. “What are you doing down here?”

Ranboo’s shoulders relaxed ever so slightly as he recognized the woman but he looked away with a sigh. “I— I don’t *know*. I was having a nightmare and then suddenly freaking *Scarlet Thorn* was, like, dragging me through here! I— I can’t remember how I got here and I don’t even know how far we are from Niki’s cause I don’t know where this *is* and I can’t even really remember where *Niki* lives, and— oh gods, you’re a freaking *hero* —”

“Okay, okay, kiddo,” Puffy interrupted gently. “Just take a breath, it’s alright if you don’t know what’s going on, you just scared me. I was really worried when I saw you were the one they had.”

“I’m sorry,” Ranboo muttered sheepishly.

Sam looked away from their conversation in an attempt to give them some sort of privacy. He scanned the area with a frown, trying to spot anything unusual that could spell trouble— wait.

Were the vines around them... starting to *move* ?

Behind him, Puffy and Ranboo were still talking in low tones, but as far as Sam could tell the vines were *definitely* starting to shift. He had been down here for hours and never seen them do that. Something was wrong.

“Captain,” he interrupted, making Puffy pause immediately. “Something’s wrong with the vines,” he warned.

Puffy was on her feet in a second, eyes wide as she scrambled for her axe. “*Hannah*,” she said urgently. “It’s Scarlet Thorn, if she catches us we’re *so dead*. She has more power with

The Egg than anybody else could ever *dream* of. Oh, god fucking dammit, shit, fuck—”

Sam tuned out the end of Puffy’s rant as he felt one of the vines slowly start to snake around his ankle and begin climbing up his leg. He could only imagine how screwed they’d be when Hannah could control all The Egg’s vines using her powers. No matter how far she was now, they’d never make it out on foot.

“Fuuuck,” Sam groaned as the vines around them started to become more active. The ones hanging from the ceiling began to swing on their own, one of them latching onto the trident strapped across Sam’s back. “We’re gonna have to go through the nether,” he said decisively, reaching for the prototype in his belt.

Puffy and Ranboo both looked at him like he was crazy, which was fair.

“Warden, I don’t see a lot of obsidian blocks with magic runes carved in them around here, do you?” Puffy said sarcastically.

Sam found the device he was looking for and lifted it up for the other to see. “This is a portable nether portal design I’ve been working on,” he explained, showing off the small obsidian box. “I’ve been working with ender chest enchantments and Dream’s powers to make a thin obsidian frame that can be stored in a smaller space—”

“Oh for the love of— *please* just activate it!” Ranboo yelped as a vine closed around his arm and started to tug him forward.

Another vine found its way around Sam’s bicep and he needed no more encouragement. He set about activating the portal while trying to dance away from the now very, very active vines.

“This will probably be a one-way trip through this portal but we’ll have better chances crossing the nether than we will here,” he explained and the frame unfolded and vines already began to wrap around it.

He hit the sparker button on the frame just as a figure clad in white and black withered roses rounded a corner further down the tunnel. Not wanting to get eviscerated by one of his best friends today, Sam didn’t hesitate to jump through the portal, leaving the tunnel behind.

The portal deposited the trio on a Basalt Delta and promptly shattered into a million pieces of black glass and magic behind them.

Ranboo immediately yelped and stumbled over towards Puffy as a very tiny magma cube jumped at him. Puffy swung her axe and killed it in one hit.

“Oh this is bad, this is really bad— I don’t even have *shoes* ,” the teen bemoaned, making both heroes shoot him a very concerned look.

Sam looked down to confirm that Ranboo was in fact, wearing no shoes. He really must have been sleepwalking considering he was decked out in what were clearly pajamas and nothing else.

Puffy sighed. "I'm sorry man, but this was our only way out."

Ranboo made a strange warbling noise and gave a tired sigh in reply. "I know, this is just... a lot."

Sam looked out over the hot, burning wasteland that they had landed themselves in and tried to imagine it from Ranboo's point of view. It was hard, Sam had been coming to the nether since he got his provisional hero license. He came here more often than almost any hero in order to gather materials for his projects or new weapons. Sometimes it was easier to make his own netherite than try and buy it.

"I know this is probably very scary and strange," Sam said to Ranboo, "but I promise you'll be okay. I know the nether like the back of my hand and The Captain is very experienced with keeping people safe and in one piece. We'll just have to make due."

Ranboo glanced at him then back out at the Delta with an exhausted expression. "Okay," he said after a moment. "Let's just get outta here."

Chapter End Notes

Can you think of anything worse than being stuck in the nether in just pajamas? I can >:) Anyway, get ready for some action-packed chapters coming up.

I had hoped to have a better schedule or balance with my outline but it looks like the thanksgiving chapter will be posted closer to Christmas so sorry about that lol. Also, the hand is feeling better depending on the day so we'll see how updates go.

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

The Heroes finally go after the Death Totems.

Wilbur gets a strange call from Quackity.

Chapter Notes

!!!MOO'S VILLAIN NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED TO STYX!!!

Sorry to shout just wanted to make sure everybody sees that. Moo's villain name is Styx, I'll go back and edit the old chapters to match. I just felt like she needed a more intimidating name, so I did it because I can.

Thank you to all the people who left wonderful comments on all the chapters, old and new. And as always thank you to my wonderful Beta <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Oh you have got to be *kidding* me,” Dream said, stopping dead in his tracks the moment he spotted the golden-haired rogue waiting across the abandoned train platform.

The Blade resisted the urge to sigh. “And that’s why I didn’t want to bring him,” he said to Vulpine.

“What the fuck Blade! Your source was a fucking *rogue*? ” Dream growled. “When we’re done here I am *so* reporting this you son of a—”

“Guys please!” Vulpine interrupted. “We’re already here, let’s just hear them out. I’m sure there is a *very* reasonable explanation for this.”

The tone of his voice gave Techno the impression that he wasn’t happy about it either, but he didn’t want Dream and Techno to start fighting.

That was fair, honestly.

“Aw man,” Foolish complained when he spotted them approaching, “I thought you weren’t going to bring him,” he said, gesturing at Dream.

Dream scoffed. “Wow, Blade. I always knew you were a bad hero, but really? This is low, even for you.”

“Hey!” Foolish protested before anyone else could speak. “I always knew you were an asshole, but I’m the one that came to him, so lay off.”

Well that just wasn’t true, but Techno wasn’t about to argue it.

“Oh, *I’m* the asshole! Which one of us fucking *kills* people—”

“Both of us actually! And if the news is to be believed you’re the one who’s killed more people in the last few years—”

“Villains succumbing to injuries from a life or death battle isn’t the same as *murder*—”

“Oh like you don’t intentionally use excessive force against every vigilante you’ve ever encountered! Look me in the eyes and tell me you didn’t intentionally *murder* Conn—”

“*Enough*,” Techno said forcefully, effectively silencing both men. That particular fight was going nowhere fast. “We have a common goal and we can’t achieve it without his help, so let’s just stop arguing and go.”

Dream huffed at that. “I think we can do it without him actually, all he has to do is give us the location and we can deal with the villains on our own.”

Foolish rolled his eyes and glared at the green-clad hero. “If by deal with them you mean get instantly killed by my sister’s powers then sure, be my guest. You need my help because I’m your best defence against her powers, they don’t work on me.”

“Yeah, I know about her dumbass powers,” Dream snarked. “That’s what these are for,” he said, reaching into a compartment in his belt and flashing two golden totems that didn’t look unlike Foolish himself.

Beside him Vulpine retrieved a totem of his own, wiggling his hand slightly for emphasis. “We came prepared for that possibility,” he said seriously.

Foolish’s nose wrinkled in disgust and Techno couldn’t help but mirror the expression under his mask.

“And I’m the one that’s so bad for breaking laws,” Techno muttered. “You guys can have fun with that but I’d rather have an extra set of hands than get that dirty dark magic all over me.”

“I’d rather use some dark magic than work with a fucking *rogue*,” Dream countered.

“If that’s the case then you’re either an idiot or your biases are extremely skewed,” Techno replied flatly. “You’re not going to be very happy with your choices if you end up needing those totems.”

“What, like you would know?” he replied, shoving the small items back into their compartments.

Techno stared at Dream for a moment as he considered how to respond to that. Did he want to tell Dream just to win the argument? Or did he want to stop him from doing something that could have serious consequences?

“Blade,” Vulpine said after a tense moment. “You— you don’t know personally… right?”

Techno glanced at the fox hybrid then back at Dream. “If you want to permanently fuck up your body with dark magic, then do whatever the hell you want. Foolish is still coming with us,” he stated before turning to jump down into the abandoned subway line. “We’re just wasting time so let’s go.”

After a moment, he heard three sets of footsteps following after him. Foolish quickly moved up to take the lead.

They walked in uncomfortable silence for a good stretch of the tunnel, not that Techno minded. He really wasn’t in the mood for more arguing about rogues or awkward follow-up questions about his relationship with dark magic. He was glad Dream was too stubborn to continue the argument and Fundy was smart enough to leave it be.

Dream, however, seemed to be having a hard time letting something else sit.

“I can’t believe you’re stupid enough to trust a rogue to guide us through the underground without betraying us,” Dream groused, breaking their silence.

Once again, Foolish beat Techno to the punch. “I can’t believe that you’re so blatantly cruel and hateful of all the people that saved your sister’s life,” he said airily. “She’s been one of us for years and all you’ve ever done is kill and arrest all her friends—” the rogue grunted as suddenly Dream slammed him into one of the dusty walls, holding him there by the collar of his hoodie.

Techno made no move to protest it. If Foolish was going to let his lack of brain cells get the better of him, Techno wasn’t going to protect him from the consequences.

“How fucking *dare* you bring her into this,” Dream snarled behind his mask. “You didn’t *save* her you kidnapped her and stole her chances at a normal life—”

Foolish burst out laughing like he found the thought genuinely amusing. “A normal life!” he exclaimed. “That girl was never going to have a *normal* life! She’s so powerful she could kill gods if she felt like it! I know for a fact that when you have powers of that calibre you don’t *ever* get a chance at a normal life—”

“She was seven!”

“And you were fourteen, being forced to go to a hero school because they thought you were too powerful to be left unchecked,” Foolish said in a much calmer tone. “I know Drista, and I can promise you that she would have *hated* being a hero. They would have figured that out by the time she was old enough and tried to lock her up. The best outcome for her was always rogue and the worst was a world-ending level villain.”

Foolish paused for a second but Dream seemed to be frozen, blank mask still fixed on the rogue. After a moment of silence, he continued. "We did the right thing for everyone. She probably wouldn't have even survived the foster system if Connor hadn't taken her. Yet all you've ever done is take out your frustration on the very people that raised her, the vigilantes and rogues that have taken care of her all these years. I'm *not* the asshole here."

Surprisingly, Dream's grip on the man loosened as he leaned back. "What kind of a name is Drista?"

Foolish grinned weakly. "It's short for Dream's sister," he replied. "Theseus gave her the nickname when she first started to get into the vigilante scene and it stuck. She probably kept it because she still cares about you, for some reason."

Dream abruptly dropped his hold on Foolish and the rogue frowned, straightening his hoodie as best he could with the netherite chest plate still on.

"Do you know where she is?" Dream asked, pointedly ignoring the way Vulpine and Techno were staring at him.

"Not at this moment, but if you agree not to report The Blade for fraternizing with me I could probably set up a meeting." When Dream hesitated, Foolish scoffed. "What, too proud of being a government ass kisser to make a deal with a rogue?"

"Fuck you," the hero spat before rounding on Vulpine and Techno. "If either of you ever say a word about this, I will find out and make you regret it," he snarled, pushing past them to continue on down the dark tunnels.

Techno looked over at Vulpine, whose expression was obscured by his fox mask. Vulpine's ear twitched and Techno shrugged in reply. There wasn't anything productive to add to that very personal argument so they both turned to follow after Foolish and Dream, who were pointedly ignoring one another now.

Techno thought back to the blonde girl in the white smile mask that he saw with Guardian and Foolish a few weeks back. It made sense that she was his sister, Drista was a strange name and she didn't exactly give off fangirl vibes. Still, it seemed a bit tragic.

Techno knew that many people that ended up as rogues came from similar origins. Wilbur had told him about rogues like Memoir who fell into a bad place and didn't get out in time. It easily could have been Techno, Wilbur or Dream; they all just got the "saving grace" from the hero commission at the right time.

He supposed that he wouldn't disagree with Foolish. Being a rogue or even a vigilante would lead to a more dangerous and less stable walk of life, but some people would have no chance at a living without it. Techno's entire family already heavily pushed the boundaries between acceptable hero behaviour and the tendency to go rogue.

He tried to imagine the serious, quiet vigilante Theseus joking around and making up a name as stupid as *Drista*. It seemed more like something Tommy would do. He really must have

just been a teenage boy at heart, hanging out with Haywire and a girl with enough power to destroy the world. What a concept.

If the silence from before the outburst had been tense then the silence for the remainder of the journey was absolutely suffocating. Nobody dared to speak as they all quietly followed Foolish's lead through the abandoned subway lines.

Alarmingly, Techno noticed that the further away from the surface the more strange, red weeds there were. He had noticed them a few weeks ago and mentioned them in his mini-briefing that he gave The Warden but even since then they had grown. Hopefully by tomorrow Styx would be behind bars and Techno could spend the time on the "Egg" investigation. From what he was told, The Warden was going on a first reconnaissance tonight, so they'd have new findings to go over tomorrow.

Oh god, he really was becoming the kind of hero that cared about investigations, wasn't he? What happened to The Blade that they called in for muscle and did all the big public fights for show? When did he actually start to give a shit about his job?

After a moment he decided to shelve that thought. That was a question for later. Or maybe another question for never, he couldn't see himself ever wanting to deal with that line of thinking.

Once they arrived at their destination it became obvious why they needed Foolish to guide them to the Death Totem's base.

He could have made a detailed map outlining the area and they never would have found the entrance. Honestly, even if they had the number of traps and spells that he disarmed in the process of opening the hidden door would have been hard to circumvent without getting killed in the process.

But in the end, they opened the door with little issue and made their way into the base. It seemed as though they had all silently agreed that it was mission mode now, so the tense banter and bickering were nowhere to be found.

Techno wished he could be surprised at how quickly their presence was detected, but he wasn't. Almost every member of the Death Totem's he had encountered in the last few months had been far more competent than the average gang member. He never had any illusion that this would be easy.

It was fine though, they all knew the plan. There was a reason that the team was limited to Dream, Vulpine and The Blade.

All three of them fought like hell on wheels when there was no one else in the way.

The second the gangsters spotted them the group split up, all taking a different hall in the hopes that one of them would run into their target before she escaped.

Techno relished every second of the fight. It had been far too long since he had done anything but scare muggers or finish a brawl in under five minutes. *This* was the challenge that his

body craved, that made the uneasiness in his blood settle.

Under most circumstances, he tried to avoid using his powers, even after years of training it was too easy to take it too far. He could never look at a person and safely guess how much energy would be *too* much. Today however he had a new target and was willing to take the risk. So what if a few of them went into comas? They probably would have killed themselves to avoid interrogation anyway.

As The Blade stalked through the halls, most of his would-be attackers collapsed where they stood. The hero's red, smoke-like aura grew brighter and more wild as he syphoned more energy from his assailants. The few whose powers could counteract his own fell shortly after, their physical strength no match for the energy boosted Blade.

Every villain that fell only made him stronger and he added their strength to his own reservoir. It was far more exhilarating than he would ever admit. Most people would consider it rather unheroic to enjoy the suffering of others, but Techno didn't care.

Huge battles like this were the closest he would ever get to a blood bath. Consciously he knew those were a bad thing, so he would take what he could get.

Both luckily, and sadly, it wasn't long until The Blade spotted their main target.

In the hall around him, five gunmen collapsed into unconsciousness as he pushed through the door into the next room.

The large bare room in front of him was jam-packed with armed gangsters, but there weren't enough to stop his gaze from narrowing in on the small group at the far wall. Styx turned and met his eyes with a dark look before shouting at her men to move faster.

All the armed guards opened fire on the hero while the group around Styx's group moved into a defensive position and began to carve runes into the obsidian frame faster. She was trying to make a break for it through the nether.

Fantastic.

The Blade ducked back out into the hall to avoid the barrage of gunfire sent his way. He double-tapped the comm in his ear to ping his teammates to his location. Hopefully, they would make it here at least fast enough to track them through the nether portal.

Even with his powers, he could only hold so much energy inside himself at once, meaning taking the large room of men out in one shot wasn't an option. Styx would most likely have the portal activated before he was done with the guards.

When the sound of gunfire tapered off into the sound of reloading weapons, Techno made his move.

He rushed around the corner with inhuman speed, slinging the trident from his back and aiming at the densest section of men to injure as many as possible in one hit. Half a dozen voices cried out as the trident sliced through unarmoured sides and grazed weapon-laden

hands. He held out his hand and felt the tug of the loyalty enchantment as it returned, injuring more men as it changed course to his new position.

The weapon returned to his hand and he wasted no time, slamming the shaft of it into the nearest man and sending him flying back into three others.

Other gangsters seemed spurred on by the attacks and finally re-trained their weapons on him. The Blade did his best to duck and weave through the crossing lines of fire but hardly noticed when a few stray bullets met their mark. With the sheer amount of power coursing through his veins, his body simply rejected the foreign objects, pushing the metal back out as the wounds began to heal on their own.

Every time a guard was met with the duller sides of his weapon or his bare hands, they found themselves flying through the air due to his power-boosted strength. Soon every man was either out of commission or fleeing into the hall Techno had come from, only to be met by Dream and Foolish as they caught up.

Across the room, the distinct sound of a Zippo lighter flicking open was quickly followed by the strange noises of a lit nether portal.

Techno looked up just in time to see the last of Styx's guards disappearing through the portal with a flash. He immediately took off after them and didn't bother to check if his allies were following, he refused to lose the villain's trail.

Gathering up the energy from the remaining villains within range, The Blade barreled through the portal and suddenly found himself on a tall hill overlooking a soul sand valley.

He cursed under his breath as he spotted Styx and her men sprinting through the cursed sand with ease, blue light from soul speed enchantments flashing in their wake.

Behind him, the portal flashed as it deposited Dream and Foolish next to him. Foolish didn't hesitate for a second as he sped down the hill, unencumbered by the terrain as his own boots flashed with the same enchantment.

"Here," Dream huffed, waving his hand and making a pair of shining netherite boot covers appear in a green flash.

Techno snatched them with a nod and hastily tugged them on over his combat boots as Dream took off.

The second he had the enchanted covers secured he channelled his powers into his whole body as he broke into a dead sprint. He quickly passed both Dream and Foolish before catching up to Styx and her small group of guards not long after.

With a mighty war cry, he lept down the slope towards them and took down three of the men with one swing of his trident. Shoving the remaining three aside he lunged at Styx with a snarl.

The woman returned his dark look with a sneer of her own as she quickly withdrew a netherite sword from a scabbard on her back. Her blade was surprisingly steady as she blocked The Blade's trident with enough strength to match him.

"You're not the only divine warrior on this field *Blood God*," she spat, twisting her blade through the trident's prongs to send the weapon flying from the hero's hand.

Techno grimace as he threw himself back to avoid an alarmingly fast swing of her blade. Not a moment later he was throwing himself into a dive roll to avoid Styx's outstretched hand that was glowing a deadly purple.

Dark sand sprayed up around him as he rolled back onto his feet, hand outstretched to activate the loyalty enchantment once again.

The trident glowed an eerie blue as it levitated and shot back through the air towards Techno. However the second it was within reach on Styx's sword she cut its path short with a strike so strong it cracked the prismatic surface of the weapon's shaft. The trident fell to the ground in three large shards as the feeling of magic in Techno's palm faded.

Behind them, Techno could hear the sound of the six guards defending against Dream and Foolish, the hero and rogue hurling insults at each other all the while. Techno internally cursed Fundy for not being there yet but hoped the other hero was alright on his own.

"Somebody get me the trigger and I'll end this!" Styx shouted as she dove back into her fight with The Blade.

Techno snarled and reached for the sword still on his belt, withdrawing it just in time to block his opponent's painfully hard blow.

The last thing they needed was for Styx to get Trigger in her system. Techno wasn't sure if Foolish could take her alone and he honestly didn't want Dream to have to deal with the fallout of using a totem.

So Techno increased the amount of power he was using, hoping to overpower the woman with a few well-placed blows. However, he found no such luck as she just barely managed to escape his attacks each time. The longer their battle drew out the weaker Techno became, but he couldn't risk letting down his guard to syphon more power from the remaining men.

Just as he could feel his own strength flagging, and knew Styx could tell, there was a series of loud shouts from behind him. Before Techno could even turn their battle to a place that he could risk a glance from he felt a sharp pain prick the back of his neck.

In front of him, Styx's eyes widened with a mixture of rage and fear. "You idiots!" she cried. "No Trigger would have been better than giving it to *him*!"

Techno took her distraction as an opportunity to investigate the now persisting pain in the back of his neck. Alarmingly, his hand closed around a small item that he yanked out and brought into view.

He frowned at the small glass dart in his palm as the series of events clicked in his head. Her dumbass men had shot *him* with the vial of Trigger. That— was that good or bad?

Before he could consider the answer to that question Styx redoubled her efforts to get a hit on him. Sadly, after only a few seconds the answer became clear as the whisper of voices began to chant in the back of his head.

Blood for the Blood God. Blood for the Blood God. Blood for the Blood God. Blood for the Blood God. Blood! Blood for the Blood God. Blood for the Blood God. BLOOD! Blood for the Blood God!

With every word, the voices said they became more clear. The louder they got, the more uncomfortable every part of him became as sweat began to bead on his forehead and his skin became clammy. His muscles were burning and his jaw was already aching from clenching it.

*Blood for the Blood God. Blood for the Blood God. Vengeance. Blood for the Blood God. Blood. BLOOD. REVENGE. BLOOD FOR THE **BLOOD GOD! BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD!***

Techno screamed as the voices became too loud and the pain became too much to bear. His legs gave out and Styx didn't hesitate to take advantage, driving her blade through the side of his netherite armour pieces and into his gut.

Dimly he felt as she withdrew the weapon but the pain was drowned out by the cacophonous screaming of both the voices and his own body. His head was pounding in time with his racing heartbeat. The bones in his jaw ached with searing pain, his ears burned like they were on fire while his eyes felt like they were melting. Techno crumpled on the ground, hand curling uselessly into the soul soil beneath him as he tried to relieve the bone-crushing agony emanating from his joints. The voices dissolved into a dissonant chorus that blended with the ringing in his ears and the shredding tension on his vocal cords.

The rest of the world was lost to him as his body did the only thing it could to try and save itself from the gruesome effects of the synthetic Trigger: his powers activated on their own accord, quickly latching onto every life source it could find and *taking*.

His body immediately channelled every drop of the gathered energy into trying to counteract the effects of the drug. The only way he could tell it was making any difference was that the pain in his gut was steadily increasing as the burning effects slowly began to diminish everywhere else.

Eventually, most of the searing and crushing pain tapered off as his powers healed what they could. Everything still felt off, the voices dimmed to incoherent whispers as the ringing in his ears faded.

Without moving, he consciously reached out for any more sources of energy, hoping there would be enough left to finish healing the throbbing stab wound in his side, yet he was greeted with nothing.

Confused and delirious, Techno weakly pushed himself into a sitting position and froze at the sight that greeted him.

Nine motionless bodies collapsed in the sand around him. Once again he tried to reach out with his powers but found nothing. They were all dead.

“Fuck,” he rasped painfully against his ruined vocal cords. The word sounded strange to his ears and felt wrong in his mouth. Something was different.

Techno reached up with one shaking hand to slowly remove his mask, hoping it would offer him some kind of relief. His other hand curled around his stomach to clutch at the sword wound in his gut. It was no longer bleeding but that wouldn't matter if he couldn't make it out of the nether on his own.

Just before the bad memories and ugly feelings began to fully settle, three of the bodies began to glow with a distinctly magic light.

Both Foolish and Styx glowed with the same golden aura of magic and their bodies slowly raised off the sand and hovered stagnant in the air for a moment. The siblings gasped at the same time and the spell broke, depositing them both back onto their feet with confused looks on their faces.

Dream's resurrection was not quite so peaceful. In his hand, the small golden totem shattered in a blinding blast of sickly green magic. Dream's body jerked violently for a moment as he arched off the ground, making a strangled noise of pain. With a final flash of light, the man sat bolt upright with a gasp before promptly ripping his mask off and puking in the sand beside him.

Totems of the Undying were awful and Dream had just learned it the hard way. Because of Techno.

Fuck.

Techno's eyes quickly strayed back to the woman responsible for the Trigger shot even being involved and the voices went *wild*.

BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD! SPILL THE VILLAINS BLOOD! BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD! BLOOD! KILL HER! AVENGE THEM!

Styx met his gaze and laughed somewhat hysterically. “Now I'm glad they hit you and not me because that was *definitely* not the pure—” she was cut off by a grunt of pain as Techno launched off the ground and tackled her.

For some reason, his first instinct was to dig his nails into the exposed skin of her neck and he froze when he spotted red under his hand. Somehow there were tough, short *claws* on his fingers that had drawn blood as they dug into the villain's throat.

LATER! The voices screamed in his head. ***KILL HER!***

“Give me one good reason not to kill you,” he snarled despite the pain in his throat. He wanted to kill her but not just because some voices told him to.

“Wait! I can— I can tell you something *very* important but—”

“Blade!” Vulpine’s voice interrupted from a good distance away. “Don’t you *dare!*” he warned, urgency in his tone.

Techno didn’t take his eyes off of the woman beneath him. “Speak now or die,” he commanded in a tone that left no room for argument.

Styx’s eyes widened with fear as she gasped out her answer. “Theseus is alive!” she cried.

Somehow that sentence silenced all the raging voices in his head for just a moment.

Techno's grip on her throat loosened as he leaned back in surprise. “What?” he nearly whispered.

“T—Theseus is alive!” she repeated. “That body you found must have already been in the bay for a while. I watched my men chase the kid out of the port, they spent half the night tracking him through the city!”

At that Techno let her go entirely and shakily pushed to his feet, still clutching at the wound in his side.

“What about the gear they found in your man's apartment?” he rasped. “Or the stuff they fished out of the water?”

Styx scrambled a few feet back from him but made no move to stand or run.

“The kid was ditching his gear along the way to lose them,” she explained. “We kept what we found and he must have ditched the rest in a gutter that flowed to the ocean. One of my men even saw him without the mask. He’s a blond kid, can’t be much older than eighteen, blue eyes. I promise you he walked away from that fight alive.”

Techno stared at the woman for a long moment, searching for any kind of lie. When he found none he risked a glance back over at his allies. Dream was leaning heavily against Vulpine, both of their masks back in place and obscuring their expressions.

He looked to Foolish and was disappointed to see a stony look of annoyance on his face.

“You knew he was alive, didn’t you?” Techno asked, too exhausted and out of it to stop himself.

“No comment,” Foolish replied with a harsh sigh.

The rogue stalked towards the villain, pulling out a pair of power inhibiting cuffs as he dragged her to her feet. As he snapped the cuffs over her hands and activated the locking mechanism, he leaned in to whisper something too quiet for Techno to make out. The woman

made a sour face but said nothing as her brother shoved her back in the direction of the portal.

“Let’s go,” Foolish sighed. “I hate the nether. And there's a lot of people here that hate me too, so best not to linger.”

Techno gritted his teeth against the sudden wave of nausea that passed over him. The stab wound in his side wasn’t bleeding anymore, but the throbbing pain was beginning to demand more of his attention. The pounding in his head and aching in his bones did nothing to help his returning discomfort.

Despite the fact that Techno was pretty sure the effects of the Trigger had been flushed out of his system, the voices continued to chatter in the back of his mind.

Theseus. Theseus. Theseus is alive.

Wilbur cheered triumphantly as he finally got a grip on his ringing phone and pulled it from the bag in the passenger seat of his car. Without taking his eyes off the highway he pressed answer and raised it to his ear.

“Hello! I’m driving,” he told the person on the other end of the line, belatedly realizing he hadn’t checked the caller ID.

“Wilbur, where are you right now?” Quackity’s voice came through urgently.

“I’m on the 305 heading back into the city, Big Q,” he replied with a frown. “What’s wrong?”

“You need to get off the highway right now, Wilbur,” he replied firmly. *“I don’t have time to explain but you’re in danger.”*

Wilbur tensed, suddenly scanning his immediate surroundings for any obvious threats. However, he saw nothing but the crowded highway, everyone’s headlights lighting up the dark as they came in and out of the city limits.

“Okay, I’ll take your word for it but I’m in a bad spot on the road for that,” he said, eyeing the approaching bridge with a spark of anxiety. “Any kind of hint for the type of danger?”

“Someone who wants to run you off the road,” Quackity told him, which did nothing to calm his nerves as his car quickly reached the edge of the large river mouth. *“Please tell me you’re not going over the bay right now.”*

“Luckily not, but I did just hit the bridge that goes over the Hebbbridge where it hits the bay so I’m going to get on the inside and hope for the best,” he replied, flicking his turn signal and looking for a place to merge.

“Fuck,” Quackity hissed.

Wilbur couldn't help but internally agree. Not the best place to be when someone wanted to cause a major car accident.

"Quackity, as much as I deeply appreciate the heads up, do you think you could at least offer a little bit of context?" he asked as the black sedan to his left sped up enough to let him into the other lane. "I'm a bit concern—"

Suddenly the sedan's brake lights flashed red and Wilbur knew he was fucked.

Before he could even touch the brakes the front of his car slammed into the rear bumper of the sedan at full speed, causing him to lose control of the vehicle as it spun into the right lane of traffic.

Wilbur was a rag doll at the mercy of gravity and inertia as the vehicle smashed against two more cars in the next lane and his Prius flipped over them, landing upside down at an angle against the bridge's guardrail.

From his perspective, all he could see was flashing brake lights shining against a rain of broken glass and backed by the sound of brakes screeching and metal scraping across asphalt. Then it all jerked to a sudden stop that made every muscle in Wilbur's body cry out in protest.

His head was pounding, his legs ached and his chest burned where the seat belt and airbag had managed to keep him inside the driver's seat.

"— *lbur! Wilbur what happened?!* " Quackity's voice sounded small and far away, but it was enough to kick Wilbur's brain back into 'someones still trying to kill you' mode.

Only through years of training and experience as a hero was Wilbur able to push aside his injuries and worries about other drivers. He needed to stay alert and do something, because there was a very real possibility that whoever was after him might come back to finish the job any second now.

Despite the disorienting feeling of being trapped upside down in his half-crushed car, Wilbur immediately spotted his keys. Or more importantly, the small knife keychain attached to said keys. He reached for the small blade and winced at the twinge of pain that came from his clavicle. Something was definitely broken there but there were bigger problems at the moment.

His mind was racing as he opened the knife and started to desperately saw at the seatbelt that was keeping him trapped in the car. There was no way the buckle release would work anymore, seeing as the centre console had somehow ended up on an angle that most definitely blocked Wilbur's access to it.

His thought swung wildly back and forth between things like *how the fuck did Quackity know this was coming? Or Who was the last person he told where he was going? Why was someone after him? What was the last thing he said to Phil? Fuck he couldn't die here, the last thing he called Tommy was a gremlin, he couldn't let a stupid joke like that be the last thing he ever said to his little brother —*

Wilbur froze at that thought. *Fuck*. When did he actually start thinking of Tommy as his brother?

The sound of an engine revving pulled him from his head and made him redouble his efforts to cut through the ridiculously tough belt with his dull mini knife. He was *not* dying here.

The yellow glow of headlight pointed at his car followed by people shouting was the only warning Wilbur got before his car was violently jerked again by another vehicle slamming into the side of it.

The knife slipped from Wilbur's grip and he tried to brace himself against the impact. Only a moment later when the whole car started to rotate and tip towards the passenger side did Wilbur realize what was happening.

Frantically he tried to search for the knife again but quickly realized it was pointless as the car started to tip further and the sound of screeching tires reached his ears. In a last-ditch effort, he snatched up a large shard of glass from the glittering pile on the roof and started to saw at the last few fibres of the belt with a renewed kind of desperation.

Finally, he managed to cut through the belt but it was too little too late. The last thing he saw through the crushed remains of his windshield was the same black sedan pushing his car over the guardrail and plummeting towards the dark river below.

Chapter End Notes

Cliffhanger? More like a bridge-hanger haha :)

Sorry for the double cliffhanger chapters but I promise it all comes together, I'm sure you can maybe guess how...

Like I said, action-packed chapters. Sorry-not sorry for all the angst, it just do be like that. I promise there is therapy eventually, just not yet.

Kudo's and comments are much appreciated, I thrive off of attention and I won't pretend I don't anymore lmao /j

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Techno's day gets worse.

Ranboo's day gets even *worse*.

Chapter Notes

Okay, in my defence I have been writing this nonstop since I started it in June, I think I deserved a month off. But sorry anyway, I really did only think it would be a week.

Have a [Techno design](#) and a [Phil design](#) to make up for it.

That said thank you all so much for over 2k kudos! I know I don't really respond to comments but I read them all so thank you all for sticking around, I know this has gotten *very* long but I'm glad people are enjoying it.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The portal was *broken*.

The portal was broken from the other side, Foolish and Dream were threatening to kill each other again, the voices weren't going away and Styx would not stop staring at him.

If Techno had tried to list the worst possible outcomes of this mission before they left, he never could have imagined it going quite this badly. Maybe Dream and Foolish trying to kill each other was predictable, but getting stuck in the nether? Come on.

He decided the only thing he was up for at the moment was having a glaring contest with Styx. Techno had yet to put his mask back on because, honestly? He felt like he was going to throw up. Aside from the fact that throwing up in a mask would be disgusting, it was also bad for his vertigo to try and look through the limited view of the eye holes.

Finally, Styx relented, turning her head away from him with a huff. "I hope it was worth it, Blade," she said. "You caught me, but at what cost? What gain? My operation will still run without me and you might never get to work as a hero again."

"Whatever," Techno grunted, not in the mood to rise to the bait.

A small wave of nausea passed through him as the voices began to scream for the woman's blood once again. He decided that, since they seemed to be going nowhere at the moment, leaning against the broken portal frame sounded nice. The second his back hit the smooth obsidian he started to slowly sink down until he was sitting in the sand. He was right. Despite the dull pain throbbing in his gut, sitting was nice.

“Don’t get too comfortable, Blade,” Vulpine warned without looking up from his small wrist computer. “We’re gonna have to get out of here on foot, I didn’t come prepared with any nether friendly communicators—”

“*Vulpine?!?*” a distant voice called out from behind Techno.

Vulpine’s head shot up in surprise, scanning the horizon where Techno didn’t have the energy to look.

“Warden? What—” he cut himself off again. “Captain? What are you— *Ranboo?!?*”

That was enough to warrant Techno’s attention. There was no way that Tommy’s timid civilian friend was with The Warden and The Captain in *the nether*.

Techno twisted awkwardly despite his protesting stab wound. Looking over his shoulder, he spotted three figures approaching over the dark soul sand hills. A sheep hybrid in a red coat, pirate hat and sunglasses, a creeper hybrid in a gas mask and gold painted armour, and a half enderman teenager, wearing nothing but a pair of blue plaid pyjama pants and a faded grey t-shirt.

Ranboo was a ways ahead of the two heroes, head-turning between the two groups as his tail swished nervously behind him. Once they caught up to him the teen vanished in a cloud of purple particles and reappeared a few feet from where Dream and Foolish had given up arguing to stare in confusion.

Techno watched as Ranboo gave Dream a wary glance before his gaze landed on Techno. The two stared at each other for a long moment, unsure how to react.

Maybe the kid wouldn’t recognize him? Techno wasn’t stupid, he didn’t miss the strange feeling of tusks in his mouth or the new claws on his fingers. But then again he was pretty sure Ranboo wasn’t stupid either. Awkward? Yes. But he was definitely observant.

Ranboo, for his part, looked absolutely drained. He sighed quietly and reached up to massage one of his temples as the other arm wrapped around his ribs. After another awkwardly silent moment, he moved a few steps over and leaned back against the other side of the portal frame, sinking to the ground next to Techno.

“Hey man, you alright?” Vulpine asked gently as he moved to kneel in front of the distraught teen.

“I’m fine,” Ranboo replied, a crack in his voice betraying his true feelings.

Fundy seemed to hesitate for a moment before deciding to slide his mask aside, revealing his concerned expression. "It's alright if you're scared Ranboo, I can't imagine you've ever been to the nether before."

Ranboo fixed the hero with an unreadable expression before he nodded slowly, looking back down at the ground.

Fundy smiled sadly and nodded. "It's gonna be alright kid, just hang in there," he said, gently patting the teen's head before sliding his mask back into place. He stood and turned to meet The Captain and The Warden.

"Everything alright?" The Warden asked, dark eyes fixed on Ranboo's slouched figure.

"Probably about as alright as anyone can be, given the situation," Vulpine sighed, one ear flicking to betray his irritation. "I don't suppose you have any nether friendly communicators on you?"

The Warden shook his head as The Captain moved past him to crouch next to Ranboo. She spoke to him in tones too low to be heard over the whispering voices in Techno's mind. Ranboo only replied with nods and shakes of his head.

"I'm afraid this was a rather impromptu escape into the nether," The Warden said. "I assume yours was too?"

Techno sighed, tipping his head back and tuning back out as Vulpine and Warden traded stories.

In his mind the voices whispered their concerns, saying things like *TechnoHurt* and *RanbooSad*. He had no idea what to make of any of it. The mindless words and meaningless phrases flying through his head reminded Techno of a livestream chat, just thousands of people speaking their piece at the same time. The words flew by so quickly that he could only catch a coherent word or sentence every once and a while.

It was exhausting. He hoped it was temporary, but the longer the chat kept whispering the more sure he was that it wasn't. The effects of the trigger should have faded by now, whatever remained, like his new hybrid traits, was probably permanent.

"Blade?" The Captain's voice cut through the not-there whispers. "You doing alright over there?"

Techno turned his head slightly to meet the woman's concerned gaze. "Not really," he said bluntly. "The trigger screwed up my whole body and I couldn't fully heal a rather large stab wound on my own. If you're offering help that would be great," he prompted.

The Captain frowned, pushing to her feet with a sigh. "Let me take a look at it. I'll heal it if it's still unstable but I don't want to use too much of my powers on you. You've already built up a bit too high of a tolerance for my liking."

“That’s fair—” Techno cut himself off in surprise as the boy sitting between them suddenly vanished in a flash of purple.

Puffy gasped as Techno saw Ranboo reappear in the corner of his eye. He turned his head just fast enough to watch as the teen’s arm shot out and snatched something from the air. Ranboo winced and pulled his arm back slightly, allowing Techno a better angle to see what he had clutched in his hand.

Techno felt his blood run cold as he recognized the wooden shaft of a gold-tipped arrow, fletched with white feathers. Ranboo grimaced as he gently let the arrow fall from his grip, revealing his now bloodied palm.

“Ow,” the teen muttered, drawing his hand close to his chest. Something odd sharpened in his gaze as he looked up. His eyes darted across the rough netherrack cliff face across from them. “It came from up there,” Ranboo said, pointing with his uninjured hand. “It was someone in a black cloak, not a skeleton.”

The shocked silence broke at that, everyone immediately scanning the surroundings for more signs of danger. Puffy closed the few steps to where Techno and Ranboo were still crouched on the ground, dropping to her knees.

“Oh my god, you gave me a heart attack, why would you *do* that? *How* did you do that?” Puffy questioned, gesturing for the teen to show her his hand.

More movement around them drew Techno’s attention and he felt ice settle into his veins. The voice began to shout incoherently again as dozens of black-clad figures began to appear from the nearby cliffs and the dunes of sand around them, easily surrounding their small group. Every single one of them brandished a weapon of some sort, from crossbows to daggers to long swords, all gleaming in menacing gold.

“I’d save the energy,” Ranboo told The Captain, drawing his hand even closer in. “I think we might be needing it soon.”

“Foolish Gae’meers!” a deep voice called out somewhere ahead of them. “You should know better than to try and cross through our territory. You are far from welcome here after what you did—”

“Take Blade and go straight north,” The Captain hissed, subtly gesturing in the direction. “Find a place to lay low until we’re done here, then we’ll come find you.”

Ranboo’s tail flicked out and brushed against Techno’s shin. “What if you… what if you don’t come back?” he said, voice strangely cold.

Techno could spot the way Puffy tensed at that. It was an unfortunately valid concern at the moment. Between Ranboo’s pyjamas and Techno’s injuries, they would be defenceless and had no way to navigate the nether on their own.

“We will,” she said, voice far more confident than her body language read. “But just in case we don’t, all you have to do is keep heading straight north and eventually you’ll reach the

portal to Warden's agency. But hopefully it won't come to that."

Techno couldn't help but huff slightly. "Wow Captain, your bedside manner could really use some work—"

She reached back to smack the side of his head. "You're not gonna die. Now go. "

The last thing Techno could hear was the sounds of Foolish bickering with the monologuing villain before the world dissolved into static.

Ranboo was having a very bad day.

Granted, he had been having a lot of bad days recently. How could he not when his sleepwalking episodes began to increase in severity until they were somehow taking him miles away from Niki's house? How could his worsening memory problems making him forget important things, like names and schoolwork, make his days any good at all?

Today, however, was a new level of bad.

On his list of *worst things that have ever happened to me*, today would probably score in the top five. Maybe even top three.

If there was one thing worse than sleepwalking into heroes, it was sleepwalking into a bunch of mind-controlled heroes that wanted to kill him. And if there was one thing worse than mind-controlled heroes wanting to kill him, it was finding out that half the people he knew were pro heroes. And if there was one thing worse than *that*... well it was pretty self-explanatory.

There were very few things worse than being stuck in the nether with three people who knew him only by his civilian identity and freaking *Dream*. Plus he was wearing pyjamas and Techno Watson, who was *The Blade*, somehow ended up taking synthetic trigger which turned him into a piglin hybrid. Not only was it a bad day, but it was just downright *weird* on top of it all.

He probably could have dealt with it so long as they didn't get drawn into any conflicts that required Ranboo's involvement. If he ended up having to defend himself, there was a huge risk of one of the heroes recognizing his fighting style and powers, of realizing who he was.

Then they got attacked by strange people in black with gold weapons. Which was just awesome. Truly a great addition to the weird and bad day.

When he teleported away, he took the risk of going just beyond the field of view from where the villains and heroes were facing off. His main concern had been accidentally ending up on a dangerous ledge or above lava, but it was worth the risk so long as they could get away without being followed. He aimed for a space around the side of the netherrack mountain, where the soul sand valley transitioned into a warped forest.

It hadn't *really* occurred to him that there might be more villains waiting nearby.

The second they materialized again, it became a brawl. A violent one that Ranboo had no choice but to participate in.

Unfortunately, The Blade was definitely suffering from his injuries and the side effects of the trigger. Ranboo was forced to dip into his full repertoire of vigilante training in order to defend both himself and the vulnerable hero. The cut on his palm stung every time he curled his hand into a fist but he didn't dare hesitate when they were so vulnerable.

He tried a number of times to get back to Techno and teleport them away, but he was too distressed by the turn of events to focus enough for a long-range teleport with a passenger. They had no choice but to hold their own until Ranboo either calmed down or took out all their attackers.

When Ranboo had fallen into the vigilante scene, he had been kind of annoyed with the amount of time the older vigilantes made him, Crumb and Theseus train. For the most part, Ranboo's guerrilla tactics with a taser worked just fine, more training seemed like a waste. If it ain't broke, don't fix it and all.

Now he was beyond grateful for the hours of seemingly pointless drills on how to protect oneself from an axe without any armour or weapons. It may have seemed far-fetched then but here he was, doing exactly that. In the nether. In his pyjamas.

Ranboo kind of wanted to reevaluate the life choices that led him to this situation, but he had quite literally sleepwalked into this one so there wasn't much he could do about it.

The retired vigilante fought like his life depended on it, because it sure as heck did. He didn't hesitate to make full use of his claw-like nails against his opponents' faces. He took every opportunity to fight dirty, hitting below the belt and throwing small handfuls of mycelium and gravel into villains' eyes before vanishing.

He teleported every chance he got in an attempt to throw off the nearly dozen fighters. He would teleport behind someone that looked like they were planning their next move, kick them in the knee or deliver a crushing elbow to the side of their head before returning to Blade's side, defending him from any assailants that managed to move closer. Once the other was relatively safe he'd vanish to take on the next attacker. Whether or not Techno was starting to catch onto his identity was the least of his worries at the moment.

Spade had once described Ranboo as a reactionary fighter. EndWalker was the kind of vigilante that waited, watched and listened before making a move. He had to be, because his power's efficacy was based entirely on his ability to concentrate. EndWalker hung back, defended and waited for the perfect opportunity to end the fight as fast as possible.

Ranboo was not fighting like EndWalker right now. Not even remotely.

He wasn't giving his opponents a chance to breathe, meaning that he wasn't getting one either. He was striking fast and hard, but with little planned intent, nothing but precious seconds of observation and impulse to guide his next moves. Every blow was meant to incapacitate as fast as possible, meaning broken bones and concussions in nearly every hit he landed.

Tommy would probably be simultaneously proud and pissed to see Ranboo fight so viciously on the offensive. It was a role he had never been forced to take before, usually hanging back while more offensive or reckless vigilantes like Theseus took the spotlight.

EndWalker's main job was to stay calm and evaluate all the opportunities in front of them. He was their last resort, and often their only escape route, so his allies usually did everything in their power to keep the attention away from him. Their system was rough, and it had its dangers, but it *worked*.

If Tommy ever heard that Ranboo took on a dozen fully armed and trained fighters in nothing but pyjama pants and a ratty old t-shirt, he would just have an aneurysm. Then he would probably chew him out for never helping as much in small brawls, and after that, he would most likely claim he could take on two dozen men bare-handed. Then Tubbo would probably call him out on it and they would laugh as it riled him up even more.

God, Ranboo missed his friends. He missed the late nights and the take-out food as they poured over case files and argued about which heroes were the hardest to take in a fight. He missed just being able to text Tubbo stupid memes or ask Tommy about ways to improve his fighting technique as they sparred.

He missed not failing school because he had friends to help him remember his homework. He missed not waking up from nightmares and finding himself halfway across the city from where he went to bed. He missed not being in the nether with five heroes, a rogue and a villain.

He very suddenly found himself missing the days when he had no idea what a crossbow bolt through his left kidney felt like.

Techno was shouting his name as Ranboo screamed and stumbled, catching himself down on one knee. Every enemy that could still stand didn't hesitate to jump into action, all pouncing at the chance to get another hit in before the teen could vanish.

Ranboo desperately tried to teleport away, even if it was just a few feet, but he had no such luck. The pain wasn't quite on par with the worst injuries he had ever suffered, but it was definitely distracting enough to keep him from teleporting. Using his powers required a level of focus that he was generally able to keep up even in the worst fights, but it was impossible to do with his mind clouded with so much adrenaline and panic.

This was exactly why he was a reactionary fighter. He was the last line of defence and there would be no one to catch him if he fell.

Ranboo had no way of escaping the first five fighters that reached him, brandishing axes and swords. He pushed past the pain in an act of sheer force of will, relying on his muscle memory to help him sloppily side step or painfully twist out of the way of their controlled swings.

It worked for a few shocking moments; he stepped out of the way of a wide downswing of a gold sword then twisted to avoid an axe to his already injured gut. He barely managed to

dislodge a dagger from someone's grip and deliver an elbow to the woman's face when he felt the painfully familiar slice of a sharpened blade across his back.

Ranboo made a sound that landed between a muffled shout and a growl of frustration as he stumbled forward to escape the sword's edge. Another two steps forward took him into a blaze hybrid's waiting fist that struck him across the face with a burning heat behind it. The force of the hit made him stumble, tripping over his own feet and tail he fell to the ground once more and barely managed to catch himself with his hands.

The teen growled again as he pushed through all the competing sensations of pain that warred for his attention. He was still in the middle of a fight, he couldn't afford to do anything but keep moving when he had no armour, no chance of getting lucky.

The sound of The Blade shouting again made Ranboo's head shoot up, his instincts having marked the man as the priority he needed to protect. He caught a glimpse of Techno dropping his sword as a man yanked a dagger out of his shoulder. Nearby, two piglin hybrids wielding axes sprinted towards them.

Ranboo grit his teeth and started to push to his feet, trying to calm down enough to teleport, when his view of the other fight was blocked by a pair of legs. Suffering from blood loss and general exhaustion made Ranboo too slow to dodge the man's boot as it swung into his face and knocked him onto his side, josseling the crossbow bolt in his stomach and making black spots dance at the edge of his vision.

Through the swimming darkness in his eyes and the ringing in his ears Ranboo saw the menacing glint of a sword arcing through the air at him. All he could do was close his eyes and throw his arms over his face, trying and failing to suppress the pitiful sob that escaped him.

Once the burning tears started, he couldn't stop them. The searing water evaporating against his cheeks was the least painful thing he was experiencing as every silent sob jolted the arrow in his stomach and made the cut across his back scream.

It was too much, all of it. After hours of keeping it together through sheer stubbornness mixed with a healthy amount of fear, he couldn't handle this anymore.

“—*anboo*. *Ranboo*. Endwalker!”

Ranboo gasped painfully at the sound of his vigilante name and jerked his head to the source of his. *How did they know—*

“Fuck,” Techno growled when Ranboo accidentally met his eyes before quickly looking away. “I was kinda hoping you wouldn't answer to that.”

“I'm—I'm *sor—ry*,” Ranboo sobbed out, voice cracking and starting to slur. “Ple—please don't tell—” He cut himself off with another sob, turning his head to dig into the rough mycelium ground beneath him. Ranboo was an *idiot*. *Why* did he give himself away like that? What the heck was he going to *do* —

“For Prime's sake I'm not gonna tell anyone! Just— Christ— *please* stop crying. I know this is all fucked up but you're makin' that injury *way* worse than it has to be,” Techno said. A moment later Ranboo felt a hesitant hand rest on his shoulder. “Just try to breathe, kid, you're gonna be fine. I took care of all the creeps so just take a second,” he encouraged, yet even through his body's aching Ranboo could hear the exhaustion in the man's voice.

The hero was right of course, crying was absolutely making everything worse, so he tried his best to calm down. It took a long time, probably too long based on the way that the teen's body started to feel a chill despite the blazing heat of their environment.

After a few moments Techno started to move, gently rubbing up and down the teens' shoulder as he pulled first aid supplies out of his utility belt. Ranboo managed to calm his breathing enough that the hero could start treating what wounds he could, but the tears didn't quite stop.

Finally, Ranboo took as deep of a studying breath as he dared. He risked a moment to open his eyes and look back up at Techno's face, only to be met with dark black eyes and a troubled look.

Techno sighed. “You vigilante kids are gonna be the death of me,” he muttered, looking back up to scan their surroundings.

“*Kids?* ” Ranboo questioned. “Ya' know somebody else?”

The Blade was silent for a moment. “Haywire,” he said, looking back down. “He's a friend of yours, right?”

A spark of panic lit in his chest while he felt a simultaneous wave of relief. Tubbo was okay, but *The Blade* had been hanging around him.

“Is 'e okay?” Ranboo slurred, closing his eyes as the edges of his vision started to darken again.

“Better than you,” Techno muttered. “We need to get you back to The Captain but I'm too injured to risk moving you on my own—” he cut himself off with a sigh. “This is so beyond the worst-case scenario.”

Ranboo's lip twitched slightly as he huffed, pointedly ignoring the spreading feeling of pins and needles in his limbs. “S okay, kidneys 're overrated anyway,” he said.

Techno snorted. “You and Tubbo are perfect for eachother,” he said. “Any ideas on how to get you out of here in one piece?”

Ranboo cracked his eyes open again, grimacing when the dark spots were still dancing in the corner of his eyes. He was losing too much blood. The only other time he had felt anything like this was—

No. He didn't die then and he wasn't going to die now. This wasn't even that bad.

“If I can sit up without passin’ out, I c’n probably teleport us closer so they find us sooner,” he said, eyes flicking back up to the hero’s face.

Techno frowned. “And if you do pass out?”

Ranboo tried to give him a weak smile. “Don’t let me bleed out?”

Techno’s eyes flicked up to glare at the netherrack ceiling far above them. He closed his eyes for a moment before looking back down with a sigh. “Well, I wasn’t gonna let you do that either way, so that sounds like the best chance we’ve got.”

“Cool,” Ranboo breathed.

“Cool,” Techno said.

Neither of them moved for a minute.

“Are you gonna—”

“Just help me up,” Ranboo sighed.

It was about as painful as one could expect. Trying to sit up without using your abs or back was practically impossible, and using his abs with an arrow through them while his back muscles screamed at the deep sword slice through them was *agonizing*. To make matters worse, Techno’s arms were shaking with the sheer amount of effort it took to help lift him, so it was painfully slow on top of blindingly painful.

Once Ranboo was fully upright, he half-collapsed against Techno’s side, but the hero seemed to do the exact same thing as his arms dropped like they were made of lead. Ranboo heaved as he caught his breath, trying to will away the encroaching darkness at the edges of his vision.

When his mind cleared again, it wasn’t hard to tell that Techno was feeling about as good as him as the hero clutched a handful of bloody gauze against his shoulder. Distantly, he could hear voices echoing through the hard netherrack terrain, calling out for Blade and him.

“East,” the Techno wheezed, pulling his hand away from his shoulder to gesture to their right.

Ranboo nodded weakly against his side, eyes drifting in the direction. He looked through the trees, pointedly ignoring the motionless bodies around them as he searched for the straightest shot possible. He wanted to avoid accidentally teleporting into another situation blind. His eyes focused on a spot of open soul sand beyond the edge of the red forest.

He took as deep of a breath as he dared, pushing aside everything for just a moment. Just long enough to focus, to zero in on his goal and—

Vwoop.

He knew they made it. He could feel the toll that came from using his powers while so exhausted but couldn’t see their destination, as this time his vision refused to clear. He

couldn't hear anything either, not over the ringing in his ears.

He wasn't sure how long it lasted, if he was even conscious the whole time. But eventually the ringing slowly became quieter and quieter, revealing to him the sound of a woman's voice speaking quietly, sadly.

“—ome on Ranboo, open your eyes. I— I'm sorry I can't heal more but this has to be *enough* —”

Oh. Puffy. Right, he was injured, wasn't he? He could still feel the stinging of burns— both from flame and water— on his cheeks, and the slice across his back throbbed in time with his split knuckles and bloody palm. But his stomach didn't hurt at all, and the fuzzy feeling of blood loss was rapidly fading, leaving his head clear.

He opened his eyes.

“Oh thank the gods,” Puffy nearly sobbed, a hand coming up to cover her mouth. Around them, he heard a couple small sighs of relief and he slowly moved to sit up.

Ranboo felt a small jolt of fear when he remembered, “*Techno*—”

“I'm getting to him next,” she reassured, standing and quickly making her way past Ranboo.

Ranboo twisted to see Techno lying on the ground a few feet away, Warden putting pressure on his wounded shoulder. Techno's head lulled to the side slightly but his eyes seemed mostly alert as they focused on Ranboo.

“You good?” The Blade rasped, corners of his lips downturned.

Ranboo nodded feverishly, “Yeah, yeah. I'm— I'm sorry—”

“No,” Techno said firmly.

“But—”

“*No*,” he repeated in a tone that left no room for argument.

Ranboo hesitated before he sighed and nodded.

Techno grunted in approval before closing his eyes, face tensing as the soft green glow of Puffy's healing powers surrounded him.

After a long moment, the glow faded and The Captain dropped her arms, looking absolutely dead on her feet. Blade huffed and he sat up with Warden's help, still looking somewhat unsteady, but decidedly less awful.

“Okay, that's about all the healing I can handle for the rest of the week, so nobody else gets hurt,” The Captain said as she slowly pushed to her feet, swaying for a moment before standing firm.

“If that’s the case then we better get moving,” Foolish said as he stepped forward. “That Wither cult practically owns everything west of here, and if they weren’t out for blood before, they will be now.”

“Wither cult?” Ranboo muttered, accepting the hand Vulpine offered to help pull him to his feet.

“It’s a long story,” the rogue said. “I’m sorry I dragged you all into it, traveling through the nether unprepared would have been enough of a challenge on its own.”

“No point in dwellin’ on it,” The Blade said as Warden and Dream helped him to his feet. “What’s done is done, let’s just go.”

They skirted the edges of the forest in order to avoid the piglin tribes that dwelled within. Dream and Techno slowly lead the way, followed by The Warden, The Captain and Ranboo with Vulpine watching over Foolish and Styx at the back.

Of course, with Ranboo’s luck, it wasn’t long before he tripped over the jagged netherrack terrain, slicing open his foot before nearly losing it to a small lava pool.

Naturally, Ranboo tried to tough it out for a few minutes until the stinging cut on the bottom of his foot became too painful to rest all his weight on. Noticing the limp, Warden made them stop to dress the wound. Once it was clean and covered in a thin gauze wrap the hero insisted that Ranboo lean on his shoulder as a makeshift crutch. The exhausted teen relented without much argument.

“You’re doing great, by the way,” The Warden said quietly as Dream and Blade bickered about the best way around the edge of an upcoming ledge.

Ranboo blinked, looking down at the man. “What?”

The corner of the hero’s eyes crinkled with a hidden smile. “I know a few hero interns your age,” he said. “I’m pretty sure that if it had been them in your place, things wouldn’t be running this smoothly. Hell, Reaper probably would have done something incredibly stupid and gotten himself killed by now.”

Ranboo smiled slightly at that. “You have a hero intern whose code name is Reaper?”

Warden chuckled lightly. “It’s a work in progress. Apparently, the name he actually wanted was Bone-Crusher so it could be worse. One of the other kids, Cyberonix, isn’t much better either, they look like they should be a villain duo honestly.”

Ranboo can’t help but fully grin at that idea. “Well, they’ll probably do well on the *heroes that look most like a villain* poll that runs every year. Good for publicity at least.”

“I think that’s what Cyber is banking on at this point,” Warden laughed. They walked in a more companionable silence for a minute before the hero spoke again. “But anyway, if you’re ever thinking of a career change, I think you’d probably make a great hero. I don’t know any kids that are as cool under pressure as you.”

Ranboo practically froze at that. To hear a hero, a *real* pro-hero say that... it was all he had ever dreamed of as a kid.

Now the words leave a bitter taste in his mouth.

How many times had he heard it from the older vigilantes? From the ex-pros that trained him? How often did he have to be reminded that one bad day was all it took to take away everything he had ever wanted?

Why did it hurt so much more that they were all right? That even current heroes, who barely knew him, could see the potential?

The Warden mistook the hesitance in his step for something else. "Is your foot bothering you too much?" he asked.

Ranboo did his best to shake it off and match the hero's pace again. "No, it's fine."

Warden hummed in reply, but seemed to watch him closer as they continue moving.

"Hey Ranboo," The Captain said, falling back into step with them, "if you theoretically had to pick a hero name what would it be?"

"Paradox," Ranboo replied without a moment's hesitation. That had always been the name, the one he refused to sully with the title of vigilante. It was funny how as time went on the name only grew more meaningful.

He received an approving series of *ooo* 's from Vulpine, The Captain and Warden.

"I like it, very punchy," Vulpine said from behind them where he was still leading Styx along in cuffs.

"Way better than Bone-Crusher," Warden chuckled.

Ranboo found himself forcing a smile at the joke. He never even got the chance to have mentors make fun of bad attempts at a code name.

"That was a pretty quick answer," Captain said, "you ever thought of being a hero before?"

Ranboo considered deflecting for a moment before he saw Dream's mask tilted slightly back towards them. Dream was listening. What was the best way to throw him off the scent? Denying his dream of being a pro after such a quick answer would be suspicious. There wasn't anything unusual about the truth, right? Either way, it would be less of a risk in the short run.

"I actually applied to Prime Academy in middle school," Ranboo said after a moment, trying to keep the sadness from his tone. "I passed the written exam with flying colours and got offered a spot in the practical hero exam, but—" he cut himself off, not quite sure how to say it. It had been years since he talked about this, and even then he only told Tubbo.

He glanced back up at Dream and The Blade limping along in front of them. Both heroes were actively listening now, Techno's dark eyes watching him curiously.

"The, um. The night before the exam my parents took us out for a celebratory dinner and, uh." God this was hard, why did he have to say anything. Why was *Dream* of all people one of the ones he was telling? "Well, a— a drunk driver hit us on the freeway. I still got accepted into the prep-education department, but my new foster parents didn't want to make the drive."

The group was painfully silent for a moment. Ranboo couldn't look anywhere but the ground.

The Warden was the one to break it. "You know, I won't lie, that school has a lot of biases and nepotism in its administration. But because of that fact, they tend to make a lot of exceptions when their alumni ask for favours."

Ranboo blinked at the sudden shift in tone, having expected pitty or meaningless apologies. "Huh?"

"Well I'm just saying, if you theoretically still wanted to be a hero and could get a few active or retired pros to give recommendations on your behalf... they could be willing to make an exception," he said, mischievous lit to his voice. "Of course, you'd have to prove to a few heroes that you can handle yourself under pressure, probably brush up on some hand-to-hand combat skills and get your GPA up, but it's entirely possible."

Ranboo finally looked up, eyes landing on Puffy as she shot him a bright grin.

"I can definitely think of a few heroes that have seen how well you handle yourself in emergency situations," she said with the same nonchalant mischief in her voice. "And probably a few that can help you with all the catching up you'd need for a transfer exam. But only if you're still interested, of course."

Ranboo stared at the woman for a long moment, at a complete loss for words. He looked past her to where Techno was still looking back at them, expression unreadable.

Techno snorted when Ranboo's gaze landed on him. "You're already more useful than half of the sidekicks that work at the Tempest Agency," he said with the barest hint of a smile on his lips. "And I have the feeling you'll be a quick study in the fighting department. But it's up to you, hero work is dangerous, as you can probably tell."

Not as dangerous as vigilante work. Ranboo thought. At least heroes had backup and reliable access to medical attention. Those two things were the difference between life and death for a vigilante.

Then it fully settled in. They were giving him a second chance. A third actually, even if they didn't know it. Ranboo never made it to the hero class exam, and even as Endwalker he always felt like he wasn't living up to his true potential, he *didn't* live up to his potential after he quit.

Ranboo could be a hero. The retired teenage vigilante could become a hero student and nobody would ever know how much of a *paradox* he actually was.

This was his chance.

“It would definitely take some real work, though,” Vulpine clarified from behind them. “They’d only make an exception if you can prove you’re worth it.”

“I can!” Ranboo blurted out, much louder than he intended. “I can,” he repeated, ignoring the rising heat in his cheeks. “I’ll put in the work. I— I would *really* appreciate the opportunity. I’ve— I’ve always wanted to be a hero.”

Puffy laughed at that, but it wasn’t an unkind sound rather than a happy one. Ahead he saw the smile on Techno’s face grow for a moment before he turned his head away. He felt a gentle pat on his shoulder from The Warden.

“Well then, I guess we’ll have to be extra careful making sure you get back in one piece,” The Warden joked. “I for one would love to have you intern at my agency—”

“Hey! Back off, he’d have a *way* better time at The Captain’s Agency—”

“Oh come on now guys, I think we all know that the *Vulpine* Agency would be the best fit—”

Ranboo couldn’t help but laugh, *really* laugh at the small disagreement. How was this his life? In one night he had gone from sleepwalking into the sewers alone to having three pro-heroes with their own agencies arguing over who he should intern with.

In just one conversation the day had nearly been knocked clear of his top ten worst days. How could it possibly be a bad day when it ended with the opportunity to get a second shot at being a *hero*. A *real* hero.

He caught Puffy grinning at him and couldn’t help but match the expression. “How about we worry about getting out of the nether first,” he suggested. “Then you guys can play rock paper scissors for who I intern with first.”

Vulpine cheered victoriously behind them while The Warden and Captain groaned.

“Vulpine always uses his powers to *cheat*—”

“It’s not cheating! It’s my *evolutionary* advantage!” the fox hybrid argued, making the others groan again while Ranboo couldn’t help but laugh.

“Doesn’t matter who’s better at cheating rock paper scissors,” Techno said, looking back over his shoulder with a sly expression. “I think Ranboo knows what agency he can get the best training from, and it’s not any of you guys.”

Ranboo’s smile softened for a moment. “Thank you,” he said, hoping it was enough to even vaguely convey what he meant.

“Don’t thank us yet kid, we still gotta get you home in one piece.”

Chapter End Notes

Ok so maybe Ranboo's day wasn't *that* bad overall.

Not my favourite chapter upon rereading but whatever! I had this done before the holidays but felt like you guys needed another chapter for the new year. I'm halfway through the chapter 18 draft so maybe it'll be out sooner than later.

Leave kudos or a comment if you've made it this far, I crave validation lmao.

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Nix gets called out for a search and rescue operation.

Nobody picks Tommy up from gymnastics.

Chapter Notes

Heyyyy, so long time no *see*. This is technically two chapters in a month so I'm not doing horrible.

This chapter took so long because the first draft was written in *November* and I've been rewriting it since then. But I think we got to a good place with it (thank you wonderful beta).

Anyway, thank you all for your patience and all the love and comments on the last chapter. The story really starts to pick up after this chapter I promise.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The frigid saltwater burned against Niki's exposed sections of skin, the temperature just above freezing as winter approached.

By all means she should have gotten out of the water hours ago, she wasn't wearing her winter gear and her powers didn't afford her much more resistance to the elements than the average person. But she couldn't stop. She refused to give up the search until they found him.

Wilbur.

If it were anyone else they would have called off the search by now. His car went into the water nearly six hours ago and using a generous calculation a normal person would have died from exposure after four or five hours. And that was assuming they had no injuries and managed to get out of the water.

But Wilbur Soot-Watson wasn't a normal person. When they ran the plates of the half crushed car they pulled out of the river his ID was flagged with a pro-level hero licence. All heroes were well trained and stubborn, pro-heroes were even more so. They would search until the weather conditions cut them off or until they found evidence he was gone. Lesser heroes had survived worse, so Niki *had* to find him.

It wasn't fair. Any of it. Wilbur's car going into the water, endangering her friend's life and putting so much of their budding plan to take down Schlatt at risk. Niki being forced to work overtime at The Rocket Agency, unable to spend the time with Ranboo that he so obviously needed as he retreated back into his shell. Nix being the hero assigned to search and rescue to look for Wilbur.

Her own joints were becoming stiff, protesting as she kicked deeper towards the bay's floor to avoid the crashing waves on its surface. She grit her teeth through the pain, releasing a frustrated stream of bubbles through her respirator. She knew what the pre-hypothermic symptoms felt like but steadily ignored them, desperate to complete her mission.

Wilbur *had* to be alive. Not just because of the role he was to play in ending the war over Trigger, but because there were people that needed him. Niki would never forget how empty their high school was the two weeks that Wilbur was gone. She still dreamt of Techno and Dream's fight over it and had *no* interest in seeing how Techno would react the day his brother *actually* died.

She didn't want to see Tommy dressed for another funeral. Didn't want to see if Wilbur's death would be the final straw, if it would finally shatter what little resolve he had left under his prickly exterior.

Niki *had to find him*.

"Nix, do you copy?" came the search and rescue coordinator's voice through her comms.

Niki bit the inside of her cheek as she turned to kick for the surface again, joints protesting and muscles burning with fatigue. *I just need more time*, she thought bitterly, knowing where this conversation was going to go.

When she reached the surface her powers took control of the water around her, stilling the waves so she could swim for the nearest boulder without much risk. She hauled herself out of the freezing bay and for a moment her body's exhaustion refused to be ignored, black static encroaching on her vision as her limbs shook with exertion to simply stay upright on the rocks.

Her control on the nearby tides slipped and a wave crashed over the rock, nearly washing the hero back into the water off the other side. She scrambled weakly with shaking arms, just barely catching herself and regaining control to stop the next wave from finishing the job. Too tired to move, Niki managed to roll onto her back and removed the respirator so she could answer the comm.

"I read you, Alan," she panted, cold air stinging her lungs and damp face as she stared at the gathering storm clouds in the night sky.

"We're calling it at the top of the hour, Nix," the man replied in a steely tone. "*There is a storm that seems to be rolling in early and we can't risk the search and rescue crew for such a small chance. Start moving your search back in towards the river mouth so that pick up is easier.*"

Niki closed her eyes against the water that was beginning to tap against her goggles and land on her face as the sky opened up. She remembered what Wilbur looked like on his first day back at school after his time out, eyes shadowed in a way that never truly seemed to leave. At least not until recently, the last time he hung out at the bakery and talked about Tommy's first time going to a drive-in movie, eyes lighting up like they hadn't in years.

She had seen that same light in Tommy's eyes last time he came over to hang out with Ranboo, talking about his new gymnastics classes. If she couldn't find Will in the next hour... she'd never see that light again. From either of them.

What if he's already gone? A treacherous voice whispered in her mind.

"Nix? Do you read me?" Alan repeated, voice tinged with concern.

Right, she was in the middle of a conversation. "I read you," she replied. "What's the time now?"

"0417 hours," he answered in military time. *"We're pulling out in 43 minutes, but we can get a pickup for you before then. Just ping your location when you're closer to the river mouth and I'll send someone over."*

Niki swallowed against the raw burn of saltwater in her throat. "Copy that," she said. There was no point in arguing, any longer and they'd have to send out the search and rescue team for her. "I'll see you in a bit."

"Stay safe out there, Nix. Coordinator out," he signed off with a click of radio static.

Niki opened her eyes again and mustered the energy to push her goggles up off her face, feeling the sudden need to be Niki, not *Nix*. This wasn't Nix's failure, it was Niki's. Whisper didn't go missing in the line of duty, Wilbur just got slammed by some dickhead on the highway. And Niki didn't find him.

Wilbur either drowned and his body was carried away by the tide or he froze to death on the rocks, waiting for help that would never come. And all Niki could do was lay in the rain and shiver, too tired to properly process her grief.

Wilbur was dead.

Niki layed on the rocks, the phrase repeating over and over in her head but somehow not quite registering. She felt paralyzed, like she wasn't even there as the frigid wind picked up, throwing more sea spray onto the rocks and whisking away her nonexistent body heat.

Her comm beeped with the tone from her agency's operator hailing her. Despite common sense, she managed to raise a hand to answer out of habit.

"Hi Nix," the cheery voice of one of the operators, Miya, came through. *"I know you're out with search and rescue right now, but your personal line has been blowing up for the last hour and you have a comm request from the Captain. She says it's an emergency, should I put her through?"*

The exhaustion had begun to set in enough that it took Niki's brain a moment to catch up. Was there some kind of personal emergency she was missing?

"W-who were the personal calls from?" she asked, unable to stop her teeth from chattering as more seawater sprayed up onto the rocks.

"You've got three missed calls from Sky Memorial Hospital, two from Puffy, one from Fundy, one from Sam and five missed calls from Clare Thomas," Miya answered cheerily. "Would you like me to patch through a callback to one of them instead?"

Niki squinted at the sky, trying to force her brain to turn back on. Sky Memorial was the hero hospital in the city, but Clare Thomas was Ranboo's social worker. There was no way Ranboo... but then why else would Puffy, Fundy and Sam have called?

Oh shit. *Ranboo.*

"N-no, put The Captain through," she managed, finally getting enough of an adrenaline boost to force her body into sitting up.

Ranboo had been acting weird lately but Niki had been so busy with hero work that she hadn't had time to really check in with the teen. If something happened to him—

"Nix where are you?" Puffy's voice came through with clear concern. "It's the middle of the night and you never miss calls unless you're on shift."

"Search— search and r-rescue," she stuttered out. "What—" she cut herself off with a shaking breath, "what's going on? Is Ran— Ranboo alright?"

The line was quiet for a moment. *"He's... Ranboo's gonna be fine. Are you okay though? You don't sound too good there."*

Niki's breathing had begun to steadily pick up even as the breaths were more shallow, muscles too tense to breathe properly without effort. "Hypo— hypothermia," she managed. "I didn't have my winter gear at my apartment."

"You what?! You went into the water without it? Are you nuts?" she cried. "Nix, how long have you been out there? What could possibly be—"

"Wilbur," was all she said. Her gaze strayed back towards the river's mouth, where many of the light over the water were beginning to gather as they headed in. "Someone h-hit Wilbur— on the Atiford Bridge and he— he went into the water."

She was once again met with silence, though this one stretched out painfully long. "I had t-to try," Niki stuttered, trying to ignore how desperate she sounded even in her own ears. "I had to *try* but it wasn't *enough* —"

"Wilbur's... dead?"

Somehow when said out loud it finally sounded real.

“I couldn’t... find him,” Niki admitted weakly between wheezing breaths. “It’s been s-six hours. They’re— they’re calling it because of the weather,” her eyes slipped shut before she remembered why Puffy called with a jolt. “Is— is Ranboo in the hospital? W-what happened?”

The question seemed to be enough to get Puffy talking again. *“Yeah, we’re at Sky Memorial. Don’t worry about him, he’s fine. Why don’t you call for a pickup before you pass out, okay Nix? Techno’s here too... I’ll deal with it. Just make sure you get back here in one piece. You’re no use to Ranboo if you’re gone too.”*

Right. Right. She was in no condition to swim back on her own anymore. The last thing anyone needed was Niki dying too. It wasn’t her first brush with hypothermia but she knew how fast it could become a close call.

For a moment she felt grateful that Puffy was willing to take the brunt of Techno’s wrath, then immediately felt guilty. She was a coward, but she also knew that if she tried to deliver the news herself it would only make it harder on both Techno and her.

What was she supposed to do next? Puffy had just told her to do something.

“Nix, call in a pick-up,” Puffy reminded her in her firm hero voice. *“The longer you wait the worse it’s gonna get, you need to call for help.”*

“R-right. Yes. Call— call for help,” Niki repeated. She laughed a bit hysterically as she remembered the symptoms of hypothermia including confusion and memory loss. Stubbornness tended to be the downfall of many good heroes and it seems she wasn’t immune. “Guess— guess I’ll be getting a r-ride— over there soon,” she laughed weakly, shoulders aching with the motion.

“Okay Nix, I’m gonna hang up now and you’re gonna call for help okay?” Puffy said, voice tight with concern. *“You need to call for help now. We’re not gonna lose you too, alright?”*

“Y-yeah. Calling for help now,” she said, hands shaking as she reached for the screen on her wrist to mess with the comm settings.

“Please don’t die,” Puffy said quietly before the line cut.

It took far too long to get her hands to cooperate, but eventually, she switched back over to the search and rescue radio channel.

“Ping your location if you’re ready for a pickup Nix,” the coordinator said in a clipped tone, *“I’ve got too many teams on my hands —”*

“I’m hypothermic,” she said, talking over him as she hasn’t been able to listen in the first place. “I can’t— I’ll try to ping but— I can’t swim out.”

She registered the sound of Alan cursing but couldn’t hold her thoughts long enough to comprehend what the man was saying. Her attention began to drift to the wet rocks around

her, distracted by the way they shined in the dim glow of the city lights reflecting against the ceiling of clouds.

There was an odd formation to her right, a larger section of the boulder that raised up and created a small sheltered overhang, away from the crashing waves.

There was something in the sheltered space.

Niki blinked back the blur in her vision and forced herself to focus on it, the obvious shape of a boot attached to a leg making itself known.

There was *someone* under the overhang.

“*Wilbur,*” Niki gasped, abruptly lunging across the rocks and practically collapsing as her limbs protested.

The coordinator was still talking, his tone more serious now even though Niki couldn’t hear his words over the ringing in her ears. Despite her body fighting every movement, she managed to scramble close enough to see his face.

It was him. The entire damn time she had been laying there wallowing he was *right there*.

“I found— I found him,” she wheezed, hands shaking as she reached to feel for a pulse. For a moment she couldn’t tell if the pulse she felt through the thick gloves was her own or his. Then the neck under her hand flexed as Wilbur let out a weak cough that made Niki laugh.

“H-he’s— he’s ali— alive. He’s still b-breathing.” God Niki could barely think, she was *so cold*. Everything was freezing to the point that she was almost beginning to burn hot where the neckline of her wetsuit chaffed, where her knees dug into the uneven rocks.

“***Nix ping your location***,” the coordinator commanded in such a strong tone that it broke through the fog in her mind. “*You’re about to pass out and we don’t know where you are. Ping your location.*”

Right. Niki’s hands fumbled with her wrist comm, managing to hit the location ping button while her words failed her.

He was right when he said she was about to pass out. She hadn’t noticed it but the small burst of adrenaline that helped her stumble over to Wilbur was wearing off, and taking what little energy she had with it.

With the last of her rational thought, she managed to clumsily squeeze into the sheltered space next to Wilbur, knowing that when she passed out it would be best if she didn’t hit her head or get washed into the water.

Everything was going to be fine though, because *she found him alive*.

Worth it, was the last foolish thought she had before slipping into the cold pull of darkness.

Tommy glared down at his string of unanswered texts, turning the curling dread in his stomach into anger. They weren't abandoning him, they were all just off doing something stupid and didn't bother checking if anyone was still picking Tommy up.

"Anything?" Jeff, his gymnastics instructor, asked as he parked himself on the bleaches next to the brooding teen.

"No," Tommy huffed. "Dumbasses can't even remember to charge their phones apparently." He turned off the phone's screen and tossed it on top of his gym bag. "I can probably catch a bus home if I'm cutting into your next class."

Jeff hummed for a moment before he shook his head with a grin. "I'd rather you stuck around so you don't get kidnapped on my watch. Besides, the next class is under twelve's so it's more weekend daycare than class."

Tommy made a sour face at the kidnapping joke. In all reality, he had been having such a good couple of weeks that he had somewhat forgotten how real that possibility was. Sticking around with the threat of his family returning should be enough of a deterrent, right?

Wait—*family*? Since when—*nope*. No. Not gonna think about that when none of them were answering his calls and abandoned him at gymnastics practice.

"*Plus*," Jeff continued, oblivious to Tommy's internal strife, "I wouldn't mind an extra pair of hands while you're *here*..."

Tommy snorted and rolled his eyes, "Really man? Stooping to unpaid child labour? That's so shady—"

"Hey! No, no, no, it's called *volunteering* actually. It's what nice kids do out of the goodness of their heart and in return can put it on their resumes and college applications to look good. Sounds like a fair deal if you ask me," he said, crossing his arms with an expectant grin.

Tommy struggled to fight off a grin of his own as he faked a bored expression. "Whatever, it's not like I've got anything better to do," he sighed.

Jeff cheered and gave him a hardy pat on the shoulder as he pushed to his feet. "That's the spirit! Go change before they start arriving, after that it's all hands on deck."

Not even five minutes later Tommy stepped out of the men's locker room to find the gym flooded with kids and their guardians. He quickly spotted Jeff, who seemed to be deep in conversation with two apologetic-looking women. Jeff caught his eye and gave him a tense smile as he waved Tommy over to the pair, gesturing vaguely at the small figure that had their face buried in one of their mother's shirts.

Tommy sighed through his nose but forced a pleasant look onto his face. He hoped the man was serious about letting him use this as actual volunteer experience because Tommy could already tell he was going to be put to work.

“Robin, Bonnie, meet Tommy, he’s a student from one of my higher-level classes who volunteered to help out today,” Jeff said as Tommy joined the small group. “Tommy this is Robin and Bonnie and hiding right there is their daughter Clementine. Clem, do you think you could say hi to Tommy? He doesn’t bite I promise,” Jeff joked, earning a small chuckle from the two mothers.

Tommy blinked at the name and turned just in time to meet the pair of curious eyes that peered out from the safety of the shirt.

A pair of familiar eyes, the same yet so different from the last time they looked up at him. One bright blue and the other a milky, near grey colour of an unseeing eye. Tommy only knew one half-blind girl named Clementine.

Clementine gasped, eyes wide as she shoved away from her mother in favour of tackling him. “Tommy!” she cried with an excited laugh in her voice.

Tommy couldn’t help but match the energy as he scooped her up in a bear hug of his own. “Hey Clem, I barely recognized you, you got so tall!” he chuckled, ruffling her hair in the way he knew she hated just for old times sake.

“Wait, Clem is this *Tommy*, Tommy?” one of her mothers, the blonde one— Robin— asked.

Tommy gave her a curious look as he set Clementine back on her feet. “*Tommy*, Tommy?” he repeated, wondering what she meant.

“We’ve been looking for you since I got adopted!” Clementine answered cheerfully as she struggled to flatten her unruly waves again. Tommy grinned at the sight, indulging in the part of him that would always thrive off of messing with his siblings.

“She always talked about her big brother Tommy, but we never really had a way to track you down,” Bonnie explained. “We had always hoped to offer you a place with us,” she said with a smile.

“Only if you wanted it, of course,” Robin tacked on, shooting her wife a disapproving look.

Tommy’s smile faltered as he processed their words. All these years someone had been looking for him? To offer him a *home*? He hadn’t seen Clementine since they were split up over *three years* ago, and her new family had been searching for him since her adoption?

“Oh,” was all he managed when he realized they were expecting some kind of reaction. What was he even supposed to say to that?

“What do you mean *oh*? ” Clementine snapped, brows furrowed. “You said you’d always be there—”

“Clem,” Robin interrupted gently, “we don’t want to push our opinions on other people, remember? Tommy doesn’t have to say anything right now, he has his own life and decisions to make, okay?”

Clementine’s face screwed up in obvious displeasure but she made no move to argue.

Jeff broke the awkward silence with a pained chuckle. “Okay, well it seems like you guys have some catching up to do so I’m just gonna go get class started up. If Clementine *really* doesn’t want to participate she can just watch for today, I know first classes can be scary.”

“Thank you so much for taking her at the last minute, and sorry for any inconvenience,” Robin said with a kind smile.

“No problem at all,” Jeff called over his shoulder as he moved back into the centre of the gym to gather up the class.

Tommy turned back to the family and the awkward air settled once more.

“I’m... sorry,” Bonnie said after a moment. “I shouldn’t have jumped you with that, it was just an idea we’ve had floating around for so long... I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable in any way.”

Tommy couldn’t help the fond feeling her stilted apology sparked in his chest. She kind of reminded him of Techno, in that *I could kick your ass across the city and back but I struggle to order coffee* kind of way. Robin was obviously the diplomat of the pair, but they both seemed earnest.

The fondness was slightly dampened when he remembered that Techno apparently struggled to answer his text and calls as well.

“It’s, um, it’s fine. I just wasn’t expecting... that,” he said slowly, still unsure how he should feel about the situation.

It was weird, right? It wasn’t just a Tommy thing?

“Why don’t we start over,” Robin said after a moment. “I’m Robin and this is my wife, Bonnie. We’re Clementine’s mothers and if you ever need help with *anything*, feel free to give us a shout,” she said, handing Tommy a business card with the name *Robin Dennis* embossed in black. “And I’m serious, if you’re ever in trouble just call us, it’s no problem,” she told him in a firm *lecturing mother* voice as he examined the card.

“Okay,” he said, offering them a small smile in the hopes of breaking the tension.

It seemed to work as both women relaxed ever so slightly. “Okay,” Robin repeated back. “Well in that case,” she turned to look at the still pouting Clementine, “be good Clem, and at least *try* to enjoy class. There’s no harm in making new friends or learning new gymnastics skills.”

“But Mamaaaa,” Clem whined, making both her mothers chuckle as they crouched to give her parting hugs.

“You’ll be fine sweetie,” Bonnie told her with a final kiss on her hair. She stood and offered Tommy a hand, “Until next time, young sir,” she said with a grin.

Tommy managed another smile at that. “It was nice to meet you both,” he said, shaking both of their hands before they turned to make their way out.

“Byeeee!” Clementine called after them, waving her arms wildly until they disappeared from sight. The girl turned back to Tommy with a sour expression. “I still don’t want to be here,” she stated bluntly.

Tommy snorted, shaking his head fondly. “Why not? You used to love gymnastics.”

“I *do* love gymnastics, but I hate other kids. They always ask what happened to my eye and eventually, I get tired of it and tell them and then they treat me differently,” she huffed, looking just a bit more than disgruntled.

Tommy resisted the urge to cringe at the reminder of what happened to her eye. He could understand her frustration with the constant reminders of the incident but also knew the other children usually didn’t mean anything by it.

“Then just lie,” Tommy replied, shrugging, “say it was something cool like taking a monkey in a knife fight.”

“That’s not cool that’s stupid.”

“Then lie and say it was something cooler, they just want a good story. Hell, when kids ask about my scars I like to tell every one of them different stories just to start more rumours, nobody actually cares why. They’re just bored, so entertain them.”

Clementine huffed at that. “I’m not a clown and you don’t make friends by lying.”

Tommy’s lips twitched with a smile at that. It seemed like her new family was imparting some sound life wisdom upon her. Good.

“Well then I guess you can have fun sitting on the bleachers and watching me teach the other kids how to do backflips,” Tommy said, gesturing to the wooden seating at the back of the room. “I’ll tell Jeff you’re too shy to learn all the awesome stuff.”

She scoffed. “Whatever, have fun pretending to be cool, loser,” she huffed, turning to stock off towards the piles of backpacks and gym bags covering the seats.

Tommy rolled his eyes as he went to join Jeff in teaching the large group of elementary and middle schoolers, unbothered by Clementine’s stubborn dramatics. She had always been like that, though maybe with a little less sass in the past. Not that the sass was bad, it just showed how much more comfortable she was in her new home.

Predictably, she didn’t even make it a full twenty minutes of watching before she came and hesitantly asked Jeff if she could join the rest of the class.

Under most other circumstances Tommy might even venture to say that he enjoyed teaching the kids class. It was low stakes and for some odd reason still gave him the satisfaction of feeling like he was helping someone. The kids were energetic and definitely hysterical at times, especially when Clem told someone she lost her eye in a tragic ball pit accident then immediately told the next kid it was a roomba with a knife.

Sadly, the fact that he should have been home hours ago dampened some of the fun parts of the experience.

He periodically checked his phone and found no answers from any of his family members. Even after three hours, there was no sign of anyone acknowledging his attempts at contact. Until today it never took any of them more than ten minutes to send him a reply, and now none of them were getting back to him at all.

Something was wrong, though he had no idea what it was or why. Phil had been perfectly fine when he dropped him off at practice that morning, promising that Wilbur would pick him up after. He said he was going for lunch with a friend, but why did that mean he couldn't answer his phone?

When they broke for lunch Tommy snagged his phone again, deciding to shoot Niki and Puffy texts as well. They had both made it abundantly clear in the past that he could always rely on them and had kept their word the scarce few times he turned to them for help.

Yet after a few minutes, there was no answer from them either.

Something was wrong.

"Tommy," Clementine said in a hesitant and quiet tone that immediately put him on edge.

His head snapped towards the girl but she wasn't looking at him, her eyes were firmly fixed on the door where—

Where Clare Thomas was watching him with sad eyes.

No.

No, no, no, no, no. Not again, please not this again—

Tommy stood paralyzed until he felt a small hand grip his own shaking one. He hesitantly looked down and was met with Clementine's mismatched eyes, watching him curiously.

He tried to hide the absolute devastation that consumed his every thought but wasn't sure how well he succeeded.

They lied, just like everyone always does. Just like the last family that said they loved him, that they wanted him, they couldn't even tell him to his face. They just sent Ms. Thomas to get him, his stuff probably already packed into the car.

This... this was worse though. There— what the fuck was he supposed to *do*. This wasn't just some random foster placement kicking him out, it was *Phil*, *Wilbur* and *Techno*. There— there was nowhere else to go. There was no coming back from this.

"Just call my moms," Clementine whispered. "It'll be okay, I promise."

Tommy forced himself to nod, despite not feeling very reassured. Maybe Bonnie and Robin could help, maybe they couldn't. Either way, it wouldn't fix whatever he was feeling right

now.

What was the saying? You never realize what you've got till it's gone?

Tommy had been so caught up in worrying about every little thing that he hadn't even noticed what he really had with the Watson's. He had never had a family that just felt so much like *home*. And now it was *gone*.

Everything was a blur after that. He grabbed his bag, Ms. Thomas explained something to Jeff who gave Tommy a sympathetic parting wave. He didn't change out of his gym clothes which left him shivering in the passenger's seat of Ms. Thomas' car, jacket covering his arms but his legs were still exposed by his basketball shorts.

The shorts had barely fit when they bought them, but Phil had promised they'd fit better once he put on some weight. They fit Tommy now.

Where did he go wrong? What did he do to make Phil, Wilbur and Techno despise him so much they refused to even give him a proper goodbye?

Ms. Thomas was talking as they drove, but Tommy could hear none of it.

His chest hurt like a knife was being driven through his heart and drug slowly down into the pit of his stomach. *Why?* Why has he so stupid as to believe he could ever truly be loved? How did he let himself get so attached when he knew, he *knew*, it would end like this?

Tommy wasn't allowed to be happy. He was *Theseus*, the hero exiled by his people despite all the good he did for them, what he did to protect them. Theseus had no happy ending, not as a hero, not as a vigilante and not as Tommy.

Everything good Tommy ever had was cruelly ripped away, his school friends left, his foster siblings dying tragically young or taken to new homes, never to be seen again. The families that claimed to love him eventually showed their true colours, and the one that *did* love him crossed the line, making him choose between lives and their love for him.

What little joy he got from helping people as a vigilante was greatly outweighed by the crushing weight of his failures, by the fear and pain he suffered on behalf of those he tried to save.

"Name one hero who was happy," The Blade said, pink braid dancing in the wind as the city lights nearly made him glow with an otherworldly light. "No good deed goes unpunished Theseus, even for me. I get the feeling you're too young to understand it now, but you should get out before you do understand."

The worst part was that Tommy did get it. He always had but he just lied to himself, forgot about the bad parts just to indulge in the rush of *doing good*.

Nothing he ever did would be good enough, would it?

Nothing good ever stays.

A hand settled on his shoulder, drawing him ever so slightly out of his dark spiral. It took a moment to realize that the car had stopped. They were in a parking lot outside of a large building complex and Ms. Thomas was studying him with an expression he couldn't quite read.

"Tommy, have you been listening to me?" she asked slowly, eyes flitting about to search his face for a reaction.

Tommy bit the inside of his cheek, shaking his head nervously. He was missing something, of course. Despite the physical ache in his chest he couldn't risk not knowing things, not when he was now on his own again.

Ms. Thomas frowned, obviously displeased by his answer. "What's the last thing you heard me say?" she asked.

Tommy couldn't even pretend to think about it before he shrugged. He hadn't registered a word she said since he first saw her.

The woman sighed. "Okay, Tommy we're at the hospital," she explained, though the words only made panic rear its head over his aching numbness. "Phil, Wilbur and Techno all got into accidents in the last day. Phil and I were in the same villain attack at a cafe and he asked me to come to pick you up when he realized nobody else could come to get you."

Tommy stared at her.

"What?" he blurted, just above a whisper. That— *what?*

"I explained that when we got in the car, Tommy. You didn't hear me say that already?" she said, the look of concern only growing on her face.

Phil... was in a villain attack?

They didn't— they hadn't abandoned him? Phil wasn't giving him up?

But Wilbur was the one that was supposed to pick him up— wait no. She said Wilbur and Techno were in the hospital too. Oh, *fuck*. His whole family was *in the hospital*.

"I— oh *fuck*. Oh god."

"Tommy?"

"I— I-I-I— I just *saw* you and completely checked out," he stuttered. "I thought— oh *prime* — are they okay? *Fuck*."

Ms. Thomas leaned back, brows drawing together in confusion. "Why did you check out before I even..." she trailed off before her expression dropped. "Oh, *Tommy*. Did you actually think they sent me to— to *take* you?"

"The fuck else am I supposed to think when nobody will answer my calls and leave me for hours then my social worker shows up!" he exclaimed as the hurt in his chest sparked into a

blaze of confusion and anger. “What the *fuck!* How are they *all* in the hospital!”

Ms. Thomas sighed and shook her head. “I can’t say I really know,” she said. “Phil and I were at lunch when there was a drive-by shooting. He got injured saving me, so he asked me to make sure you were okay.”

“*What the fuck!*”

To Tommy’s surprise, the social worker just laughed, the sound genuine yet heavy. “I don’t know, kiddo. Why don’t we just go in and ask Phil, I’m sure he’s got all the answers by now, knowing him.”

Tommy just shook his head, moving to shove his way out of the car. He ignored the late autumn air nipping at his legs as he stalked towards the front entrance, Ms. Thomas trailing after him.

What the actual *fuck?* One second he thought he was losing his new family— fuck he really did think of them as his fucking *family* didn’t he— and the next he finds out they’re all in the hospital. *What. The. Fuck.*

He easily could have lost them for real, if their luck were worse. They could have died while Tommy was just dicking around at gymnastics.

The nurse at the front desk said they were only allowed family visitors at the moment, so Ms. Thomas shot him a reassuring look as he followed the man deeper into the hospital halls.

Tommy was led to a large room with four beds, but only one of them was occupied.

The man sighed. “The whole point of putting them in the same room was to stop them from wandering around,” he grumbled under his breath. “I’ll get someone to bring them back when they turn up. Please try to convince them to rest, they shouldn’t be moving so much.”

Tommy nodded mutely, gaze fixed on the unmoving figure in the occupied bed. Phil and Techno wandering seemed like the least of his worries when Wilbur was completely immobile here.

The door swung shut behind him as the nurse quietly left, leaving only the sound of Wilbur’s medical machines and Tommy’s pounding heart.

He was hooked up to a *lot* of machines. A few of the monitors Tommy recognized as the standard from his time in hospitals, but there were a few more he didn’t know, plus an oxygen tube in his nose and a few bags in a hanging IV. There seemed to be noticeably more blankets than the norm, the heat control for an electric blanket visible at the foot of the bed.

Tommy had to stop himself from rushing to the man's side despite how desperate he was to see the damage for himself. He crossed the room stiffly, coming to a stop just a foot away from the edge of the bed.

Upon closer inspection, he saw plasters on the man's face and pads set up to stabilize one of his arms. A broken clavicle maybe? His face was pale, but not deathly so. Either way, it was

not a comforting sight.

As relieved as Tommy was that the Watson family *hadn't* been sending him back, he wasn't overly fond of the reality. At least Techno and Phil were well enough to stubbornly wander around the hospital, but Wilbur didn't look like he would be conscious for a few more days at least.

Tears abruptly stung Tommy's eyes as he hovered by the man's bedside. This was all too familiar in a very unwelcome way. Every time Tommy managed to land himself in a relatively safe place, somewhere where he allowed himself to foolishly grow attached to the other members of the house, it always ended like this. Tommy's sheer volume of bad luck he had seen both himself and those he cared about wind up in the hospital, ruining what little good he had been clinging to.

Logically Tommy knew this was different, in a way. Nobody was being removed from the home, Tommy wasn't losing anyone. Wilbur was laying right in front of him, breathing and alive. Techno and Phil were fine, wandering around to cause trouble for the hospital staff. Tommy was here, fetched by Ms. Thomas at Phil's request because he was *worried* about him being left alone.

Logic didn't stop the tears from silently spilling over. The last time he and Clementine saw each other was in a hospital like this, Tommy saying his final goodbyes to the unconscious girl as Ms. Thomas led him away. It was Tommy's fault she got hurt, he couldn't protect her well enough. After that he promised himself he wouldn't get attached, wouldn't get close so he didn't hurt like that again.

Obviously, he had failed at that. He didn't even know what happened to Wilbur and doubted he could have stopped it, but seeing him so frail, so vulnerable still made Tommy's chest hurt. Caring about people always led to hurt like this. He *hated* it.

To Tommy's surprise, Wilbur's eyelids fluttered weakly before they cracked open just enough to squint at Tommy. "Hey Toms, what are you crying for?" he rasped with a weak smile. "I know I couldn't pick you up from gymnastics but it couldn't have been that bad."

Tommy opened his mouth, either to call Wilbur a prick or ask if he was alright, but all that came out was a choked sob. His throat burned with the need to rant, to shout and yell or beg and cry to know what happened, but none of it came as Wilbur gently shushed him and managed to get him to the chair on the other side of the bed.

Wilbur did his best to comfort him or try and ask why Tommy was crying, but Tommy doubted he could have answered if he tried. It was stupid anyway, it was so stupid because everything was fine. Seeing Ms. Thomas had just set off a whole whirlwind of alarms and reactions in his head that were completely unnecessary yet still took their toll.

Wilbur eventually gave up on trying to get him to talk and just held Tommy's hand in his uninjured one. He offered weak reassurances and repeatedly apologized for not being able to help, which for some reason only made Tommy want to cry harder. It wasn't Wilbur's fault in the first place yet he was still talking like it was his responsibility to make sure Tommy was okay.

It made him feel loved which made him feel scared, because nothing good ever stayed and it made the pain all the worse.

Eventually, Phil was ushered back into the room by a disgruntled nurse. “Look, your kid is crying, deal with that and stop causing trouble,” the nurse hissed, closing the door as Phil limped towards them on crutches.

“What’s wrong?” he urged, eyes flicking between the boys. “Are you okay Tommy?”

Tommy didn’t even know how to explain the absolute rollercoaster of emotions he was stuck on but he knew the easier way to sum it up was no, he wasn’t really okay. He slowly shook his head and Phil offered a small “awe, mate,” before quickly closing the distance to him.

Tommy couldn’t even pretend that he wasn’t leaning into the gentle hand Phil placed on his head. His eyes slipped closed, pushing a fresh wave of tears down his cheeks as Phil sighed, gently petting the hand over his hair.

“Okay, let me just grab a chair,” he said gently, the hand disappearing a moment later.

Tommy resisted the urge to whine at the loss, still aware enough to know how mortifying that would be. A few seconds later Phil returned, awkwardly shuffling with one crutch and another chair that he parked so close to Tommy’s that the armrests touched.

Once Phil was settled Tommy didn’t hesitate to drop his head against his shoulder, despite the slight discomfort of the man being so much shorter. Phil sighed quietly and wrapped his arm around Tommy while the other returned to petting his hair gently.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked, voice achingly soft and kind.

Tommy bit the inside of his cheek and shook his head. He wouldn’t even know what to say if he were able to talk at the moment.

“He’s... not in a talking mood,” Wilbur rasped from the bed, hand gently squeezing Tommy’s.

“Okay,” Phil said, “is there anything we can do to help right now Toms?”

In reply Tommy just squeezed Wilbur’s hand back and snuggled ever so slightly closer to Phil’s side, drawing tired chuckles from both.

“Okay, we can just hang out for a little while,” Phil said, slime evident in his voice though Tommy couldn’t see him. To his surprise, Phil turned his head and planted a soft kiss against Tommy’s hair, a move Tommy was fairly certain *no one* had ever done to him before. “We’re not going anywhere kiddo.”

“Yeah, we’re here for you Tommy,” Wilbur agreed, running his thumb over the back of Tommy’s knuckles gently.

Tommy’s lips pulled into a weak smile despite the new wave of tears that flooded his eyes. No family had ever made Tommy want to believe those words so much. No family had ever

made him feel so secure with just a few words of reassurance.

No family had ever made him feel so loved.

If only it didn't make him feel so fucking scared.

Chapter End Notes

The foundest of family <3

Anyway, I can't promise any kind of consistent updates anymore but I've got two active drafts for 19 and 20 so that's something. I've been writing this for a while so it just gets a little hard to stay on track when I've basically written it in my head 20 times over. I promise this will be finished someday but I think it's gonna stay slow for the time being.

In other news, this will be part of a series! I have a couple of back story fics already in the works so maybe those will show up sooner than later.

Other than that maybe drop a follow on my [Twitter](#)? I post all my art there as well as updates about my writing. Also if you're reading this you're awesome <3

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Everyone tries to rest and recuperate after an eventful week.

Chapter Notes

Okay I know I usually try to post about a week apart but I was way too excited about this chapter. I really hope you guys like it.

Of course, thank you all for the love and wonderful comments and thank you to my lovely Beta for helping me out <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy awoke with a start, heart pounding as he instinctively wrestled the thin blankets off of himself.

The room was dark but he knew he was in a hospital; the sound of quiet machines, smell of antiseptic cleaning solutions and the crispness of the sheets under his hands all setting him on edge. But why was he here? He didn't feel injured at all—

“Tommy?” a gruff voice interrupted his racing thoughts.

Right. Tommy wasn't the injured one, he was here because of his family.

God he was so weak. Family was supposed to be a taboo word yet here he was.

“You good kid?” Techno's voice sounded again, making Tommy squint at the shadowed figure in the bed across from his.

Tommy let out a shaky breath and nodded, tongue still stubbornly disobeying his commands.

“I can't exactly see in the dark, but I'm gonna take that as a no,” Techno said after a moment.

Tommy huffed as he swung his legs off the edge of the bed. He supposed being non-verbal was generally an indication something was wrong but was surprised Techno caught on so quickly. He had never really had any times like this when Techno was around. Though Wilbur used to have a similar issue, so maybe he still had the instincts.

He slid to his feet and gently padded over towards Techno, hesitating when he reached the bedside.

Techno squinted at him in the dimness, letting Tommy stew awkwardly for a moment. The sound of fabric rustling was accompanied by a sigh as he moved over.

“For the record, I’m only doing this because Phil and Wilbur need the sleep,” he said as Tommy slipped into the empty space beside him. “I don’t usually do... touchy feely.”

Tommy nodded in agreement then immediately dropped his head on the man’s shoulder, deciding the risk of being shoved out of the bed was worth it. Techno sat rigid for a moment before he sighed in resignation, muscles slowly relaxing as he accepted Tommy’s weight against his side. Tommy smiled into the darkness.

“Brat,” he muttered with no real bite in his tone.

Tommy just nodded his head gently where it still rested on Techno’s shoulder, earning him a fond huff. They fell into a comfortable silence after that, the subdued sounds of the hospital muffled by the door.

“Were you having a breakdown earlier because you were worried about all of us or something else?” Techno asked after a minute.

Tommy looked down at the barely visible outline of his hands resting limply in his lap. That breakdown...had been the combination of a lot of things. Seeing Clemetine and her new family would have already saddled him with a whole slew of emotions on its own, but with everything else? Hell, even just the misunderstanding with Ms. Thomas would have been worth a break down. Seeing Wilbur so hurt and knowing Phil and Techno were too... he was pretty sure he hadn’t actually managed to process any of it yet.

In the end he just shrugged, drawing a soft sigh from Techno.

“Both?” he asked.

Tommy nodded, reaching a hand up to pick at the skin of his lips.

Techno hummed wordlessly as he reached a hand over to tug Tommy’s hand down. “You shouldn’t pick at them so much,” he said, tone firm but not unkind.

“Fuck you,” Tommy whispered, surprised when the sound actually came out of his mouth.

Techno tensed for a moment before relaxing with a soft chuckle. “You’re such a child,” he laughed.

Tommy smiled despite himself. He could probably count the times he’d heard Techno laugh on one hand so every little chuckle counted as a win in his book.

“Maybe you’re just stuck up,” he teased in a hoarse voice.

Techno scoffed. “Last time I ever try to comfort you,” he grumbled despite making no move to push Tommy away. Tommy just huffed out a small laugh in return.

He found himself simply biting at his lip despite Techno’s warning. Hospitals always made him nervous and the gaps in his knowledge weren’t helping. Tommy had fallen asleep on Phil’s shoulder and woken up in the unoccupied bed just now. He still had no idea what happened to Techno or Wilbur.

An unfriendly voice in the back of his head reminded him that he still didn’t know these people, that Phil still hadn’t told him the catch. It reminded him that Wilbur wasn’t an investigative journalist and that he had no idea what Techno did for work, only that the man was a skilled fighter. Maybe they all got into freak accidents, but perhaps, and more likely, they didn’t. Perhaps it all came back to that one thing Phil wouldn’t trust him with yet.

How unfair was it that he instinctually clung to them even when he knew there wasn’t full trust yet. Not that Tommy was in any position to talk, he hadn’t even told them about Clementine, much less his vigilante past or powers. But still.

“You are overthinking very loudly,” Techno informed him.

“What happened to you and Wilbur?” Tommy blurted instead of dancing around it like he probably should have.

Techno hesitated. The same hesitation Wilbur had before he claimed to be an investigative journalist and the same hesitation Phil had when Tommy called him out for hiding something.

So the mean little voice in his head was right. It wasn’t a series of freak accidents.

“Wilbur was in a car crash,” Techno said, shifting slightly under Tommy’s head. “Someone hit his car off the Atiford Bridge and sent him into the river. Apparently they had just called off the search and rescue operation when Nix accidentally found him in the bay.”

Oh. Holy shit. Okay, well that sounded true if the tension in Techno’s voice was anything to go by. He sounded angry, though Tommy was sure it wasn’t directed at him.

Wilbur was really fucking lucky to be alive. The bridge spanned the mouth of the Hebride river where it met the bay. Tommy had only been over it a couple times but he was certain the fall was more than a couple hundred feet, it was a miracle they even bothered to *send* search and rescue out for him. Especially with Nix, she was usually a day time hero.

“Jesus.”

“Yeah,” Techno agreed.

Tommy frowned when he made no move to explain his own injuries. “And you?”

“Accident at work last night,” he replied in a far more casual tone, too forced to not be a lie. “I’m a security guard at the port.”

Tommy resisted the urge to scoff and bit his lip hard enough to taste iron. Right, a security guard at the port. It was the perfect excuse for people involved in shady business that tended to result in strange or severe injuries.

“Well that’s just bad timing,” was all he said after a moment. If Ms. Thomas hadn’t also vouched that Phil was, in fact, in a villain attack, Tommy might have even started to consider the possibility of their incidents being linked. Hell, maybe Phil had been the target of the shooting and they *were* connected.

“You’re telling me,” Techno huffed, seemingly oblivious to Tommy’s suspicions.

Tommy said nothing and they fell back into the silence of the room, albeit tenser this time. After a few minutes of silence, the sound of fabric rustling and the feeling of Techno shuffling under his head drew Tommy’s attention.

He frowned and squinted into the darkness only to be met by the blinding light of a phone screen coming to life. Both of them winced as Techno deftly moved his black painted fingers to turn the brightness down as far as it would go. Techno shuffled around a bit more and Tommy moved to accommodate him until they settled back down with the phone visible between them.

Unsurprisingly, and boringly enough, Techno immediately opened the news, slowly scrolling through the top articles of the last week. Tommy resisted the urge to complain out of force of habit. He wouldn’t actually mind looking at the news right now, having not caught up in a while. Some of the articles from the past couple days were actually very much of interest to him.

The Blade, Dream and Vulpine had apparently arrested the head of the Death Totems, Styx. The same villain who had killed all the gunrunners and supposedly the vigilante Theseus. Techno clicked on the article and scrolled through it slowly enough for Tommy to read over his shoulder. Had it really been three and a half months since that fight? Honestly Tommy was surprised they hadn’t caught her sooner. But it was good news, at least his assumed death had been avenged, and by his nemesis no less.

The next article they read was a short piece about Nix’s hospitalization following a search and rescue operation. Obviously, the details were scarce but there was enough to know it was Wilbur’s accident they were talking about. Though he could never remember encountering the hero, he hoped she was okay. She had saved Wilbur’s life after all. Tommy’s too, a few months prior, so she was good in his books.

Tommy blinked in surprise at the next article they came across. *‘Trigger: What You Need to Know’*.

Tommy wasn’t stupid, he had noticed the uptick in destructive villain fights in recent weeks and knew they were a result of Trigger spreading, but he was surprised it was being made public knowledge now.

Techno immediately clicked it, scrolling a little bit faster this time. Tommy found himself sitting up straighter as they skimmed the contents of the article. It was a watered-down

version, obviously, but it was still more information than he would have expected the hero commission to give the public.

The article didn't include specifics about variant types of the drug or its biological agent but it went as far as to explain possible side effects, like permanent loss of power control or exacerbation of hybrid trait presentation. When they got to the bottom of the article Tommy bit his lip to keep himself from reacting. *Written by Ted Nivison.*

Well that certainly explained how it was so expertly crafted to scare the public off of the stuff but not enough to cause panic. Tommy just hadn't known that Memoir still *had* a creditable civilian identity. You learn something new every day.

Techno abruptly clicked the phone screen off with a sigh, shoulders sagging somewhat.

Tommy frowned. What did that reaction mean? Was he disappointed about Trigger being public knowledge now? Had he known about it before and hoped it would stay hidden?

"Can I tell you something kinda messed up and you won't freak out?" Techno said after a minute, doing nothing to calm Tommy's nerves.

"Sure?" Tommy replied hesitantly.

"Promise you won't freak out? If you scream you'll make Phil and Wilbur panic and probably hurt themselves."

Tommy bit his lip, and subtly leaned away from the other. "And why exactly would I scream?"

Techno didn't answer for a long, nerve-wracking moment.

"The longer you stall the more likely I am to freak out," he informed him.

Techno let out a weary sigh. "I got hit with a dose of Trigger in the crossfire of the villain fight while I was at work," he admitted, making Tommy's heart practically stop. "It's...not pretty."

Before he could respond the phone screen flashed on again, illuminating Techno's face again, only this time Tommy was looking directly at him.

Techno's face just looked... *wrong*.

His overall appearance was relatively the same but his features were all different. The sclera of his eyes were nearly pure black while the pupils stood out in white. His jaw was broader and a small set of tusks poked out from his lips. His ears were a different shape, pointed and sticking out more obviously from under his wild mane of pink waves.

Techno was a *piglin hybrid*.

Tommy tensed like a coil ready to spring. "*Holy fucking sh* —mm!" Tommy was cut off as Techno lunged to smack a hand over his mouth, claws— fucking *claws* not painted nails—

digging slightly into his face.

“You said you wouldn’t freak out,” Techno practically growled.

Tommy quickly wrestled out of the man's grip and stumbled as he shoved away from the bed. “How the fuck am I supposed to not *freak out*, ” Tommy hissed. “What the *fuck*? Do you—do you even know how lucky you are to be *alive*?”

Techno’s exasperated expression shifted ever so slightly before the screen fell back asleep, plunging them into darkness again.

“No, actually,” Techno said after a tense moment, “that article was the most anybody’s been able to tell me about that stuff. I didn’t see anything about mortality rates, did you?”

Shit . There hadn’t been anything about that in the article. Most of what Tommy knew about Trigger was the information straight from the source, including the knowledge that surviving the synthetic trigger in one piece was incredibly statistically low.

There was that tone again though. The forced casualness, different from his deadpan deliveries or veiled anger. Techno was lying again, about Trigger this time.

Fuck. But did Phil and Wilbur know? Phil promised the catch wasn’t a danger to Tommy, was that a lie too? Were they all in on Techno’s mysterious business or was he lying to them as well?

The tense silence that fell between them snapped at the sound of Wilbur’s hacking cough, followed by a whimper of pain and cussing. Tommy shoved aside his paranoid spiraling and quickly moved to Wilbur’s bedside.

“Hey Will, you okay?” he asked gently, running a hand over the man's hair.

“*Peachy*, ” Wilbur wheezed out. “Mind hitting the lights for me?”

“Sure.”

Not a second after the light flicked on Phil was sitting bolt upright in bed, feathers ruffled as he quickly scanned over the three boys. Tommy watched as his gaze settled on Techno with a slight frown. “What’s your problem?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Techno said plainly, eyes never leaving Tommy as the teen slowly made his way back to Wilbur’s side, gaze equally as searching.

Wilbur sighed, looking between his brother and Tommy a few times. “Techno just because Tommy’s freaked out by the whole hybrid transformation thing doesn’t mean you have to be a dick to him. Tommy, be nice, it's not Techno’s fault.”

Tommy resisted the urge to narrow his eyes at Techno. *Or is it?*

“He started it,” Techno replied with a huff before turning back to his phone like nothing had happened.

Tommy frowned as he settled on the edge of Wilbur's bed, so that's how he wanted to play it huh? "Sorry," he muttered. He turned to look over Wilbur and frowned when he found the man slowly sitting up. "You're looking better. Ish."

Wilbur offered him a shaky grin. "The bone healing doctor paid me a visit right after you conked out," he said, gesturing with his arm that was now in a sling as opposed to supports. "You're sounding more chatty, feeling better?"

He forced a nod. "A bit, yeah. It was just a little overwhelming, I'm not the biggest fan of hospitals." That much was true, though it was definitely not the sole cause of the whole breakdown thing.

Wilbur grimaced. "Yeah that's fair. I'm so sorry Toms—"

"No," Phil and Techno cut him off in unison.

"But—"

"No, Will," Phil said firmly. "You have nothing to apologize for, you were hurt in an accident which was absolutely not your fault."

Wilbur opened his mouth to argue but Tommy beat him to it. "It's fine Wilbur, I'm just glad that everyone's alright. Some psycho trying to run you off the road isn't your fault, so don't apologize."

Wilbur fixed Tommy with a painfully soft look. It made him want to turn away and ache for a hug at the same time. "Okay, but I'm just generally sorry if we scared you. I know you're not the biggest fan of being left alone."

Tommy bit his lip and glanced away with a nod. That was also somewhat true, since the discovery that Schlatt was after him and the stalker watching the house at night Tommy had made a conscious effort to always be around someone. Even if they couldn't help defend Tommy there would at least be a witness if something happened.

His gaze fell back on Techno who was subtly watching him, head still angled down toward his phone. Anxiety curled in his gut. He was still missing something here, something big.

"You doing alright there mate?" Phil asked, drawing Tommy's attention. The man offered him a kind smile. "Lookin' a bit stressed."

"I'm fine," Tommy sighed, settling back against the headboard next to Wilbur. "Just don't like hospitals."

Phil made a sympathetic noise while Wilbur turned to frown at Tommy. Tommy raised an eyebrow at him. "What?"

Wilbur narrowed his eyes. "You need a hug," he declared. "But my arms are messed up so go hug Phil."

"What?" Tommy sputtered. "I'm a fuckin' big man, I don't need a hug! I'm fine!"

“Big men need hugs too, child,” Wilbur said, reaching with his good arm to poke Tommy in the ribs. “Now *go*.”

Tommy scoffed but was forced to slide off the bed in order to escape the teasing jabs against his side. He lightly smacked Wilbur's hand as he walked away. Phil laughed at their antics but moved to clearly accommodate space on the bed next to him.

“For the record, I’m only going to sit with Phil because you two are dickheads,” Tommy announced as he dropped down into Phil’s waiting arms. He was quickly engulfed in a warm embrace, a shadow falling over them as Phil’s wing shifted around him as well.

Tommy’s eyes absolutely did *not* sting when he dropped his head against Phil’s shoulder and was met with a gentle kiss against his forehead.

He practically went boneless, making Phil chuckle. “When did you wake up?” he asked instead of commenting.

“Just now,” Tommy sighed. Allowing his eyes to close for a moment he gave in to the illusion of safety the arms around him provided.

Phil hummed, the sound strange to Tommy’s ear as it rested against him. “You must’ve really needed the rest, you passed out before sunset and it’s like five-thirty now.”

Tommy frowned. “A.M.?”

“Yep.”

“Well that explains why I’m so hungry,” he muttered, drawing laughs from Phil and Wilbur.

“There’s a vending machine down the hall if you’re starving,” Phil suggested. “But the cafeteria opens at six if you’d rather wait for that.”

What, go to the cafeteria by himself and risk someone trying to nab him while nobody he knows is around? No thanks.

“I’ve got cash in my bag,” Tommy said instead, reluctantly pulling away from Phil’s side.

“Grab me something with chocolate in it!” Wilbur called as Tommy made his way out the door, wallet in hand.

“Will *no* —” was all Tommy heard from Phil as the door closed behind him.

Tommy found himself zoning out as he stared at the wall of snacks inside the machine. He just couldn’t get over the fact that there was some link between Techno and Trigger. It felt like Tommy should have figured it out, that he should have noticed by now, but nothing was coming to mind. Still there was *something* he was missing.

Eventually his hunger made him drop the thoughts. Techno made it pretty clear that he was suspicious of Tommy but that he wasn’t going to do anything in front of his dad and brother.

Tommy's paranoia and racing thoughts didn't seem to be getting him anywhere so he'd just let it sit for now.

He inserted the cash and punched in the corresponding numbers, letting all the snacks collect in the drop slot as he selected more. The final item, a snack-size Pringles can, tipped forward and hit the glass with a small *tink* as it rested awkwardly instead of falling like it was meant to.

"I hear trying to tip the machine is a good way to get it out," a man's voice said, far too close to Tommy's ear.

The teen flinched at the cold press of a knife against his side. There was an overwhelming smell of diesel and cigarettes as the man stepped up behind him, into his personal space. Tommy grimaced as he realized the hall was empty.

"Did you know more people die from being crushed by vending machines than shark attack casualties every year?" he joked nervously. "Sometimes it's better to just let the snack go, it's only a couple bucks."

The man hummed, but the sound was patronizing. "Yeah, some things aren't worth dying for," he said, digging the knife a little harder against Tommy's side. "Got a second to chat?"

Now Tommy was fully aware he could take the guy. He knew that no matter how strong the man's powers were Tommy could just cancel them out. He knew how to take a single attacker with a knife when unarmed. He knew he was a good fighter, that he had kept up his practice in sparring with Techno.

But Tommy was also aware that if he beat up some guy in the middle of the hospital there would be questions. Questions that he didn't want asked. He also knew that he was unlucky as shit these days and really wasn't in the mood for getting stabbed, even if he was in a hospital. Tommy didn't have the best track record with healing powers.

"I've gotta get this food back to my brother sooner than later, but yeah I'm suddenly not that busy," he replied uneasily, wishing he were better at hiding his emotions. The last twenty-four hours had been draining; Tommy was too much of an emotional smoothie to truly play it cool.

"It'll be quick, I promise," the man said, wrapping an arm around Tommy's shoulder to guide him down the hall.

They arrived at the two single bathrooms at the end of the hall and the man steered them into one, removing his arm from around Tommy to flick the light on and lock the door behind them.

Tommy swallowed nervously as he backed up to the far wall, finally getting a look at his assailant. It was the guy who had been stalking the house at night, explaining the cigarette smell. He was almost relieved at the sight, having been momentarily worried he misjudged the situation when the man shoved him into the bathroom.

Stalker Guy made no move towards him, simply leaning back against the locked door and studying Tommy with sharp eyes. The knife twirled dangerously in his hand, glinting under the fluorescent lights.

“You know this is honestly the kind of place I’d expect to meet a stalker,” Tommy joked, deciding to lean back against the sink. If all else failed he could break the mirror and have something sharp to defend himself.

The man offered a noncommittal hum but gave no other reaction. They stared at each other in intense silence.

“I’m sorry about your brother by the way,” the man said after a minute, knife stilling in his hand, “that car accident was supposed to kill him. I’ve never been a fan of traumatizing innocent bystanders...but I suppose he’ll be alright. The warning was supposed to be the coffee shop getting shot up.”

For a painful second Tommy forgot how to breathe.

“What?” he nearly whispered, voice cracking despite himself.

The man smirked. “The car accident and the shooting that put them in the hospital, that happened because of you.” The knife resumed its twirling. “Though as much as I’d love to take credit for fucking up the other one, I have no clue what he’s doing hopped up on Trigger. Guess you probably don’t know them as well as you though, huh?”

Tommy bit his lip, not even flinching as a scab split with a sharp sting. He took a shaking breath, theoretically Schlatt’s people should think Tommy was a civilian. Why go to such extreme measures?

“Why... *why*? What do you *want* from me? I don’t understand—”

“Your powers, Thomas. Or, you prefer Tommy, don’t you?”

Tommy swallowed down the sick twist in his stomach at the sound of his name in the man’s mouth. “I don’t *have* powers!” he tried.

The man rolled his eyes. “Right. I don’t really feel like playing the dumb game with you right now so I’m just gonna be straight,” he said, knife hand dropping to his side. “Mr. J. Schlatt assigned the job of capturing you to Hellcat. And Hellcat hired me, because I’m the guy that makes people disappear with no questions asked.”

Tommy’s heart was pounding in his chest. This was exactly the kind of situation he had always tried to avoid. As a vigilante he stuck to taking down muggers and rescuing call girls because *nobody cared*. The *last* thing he wanted was people on Hellcat’s level having any vested interest in him yet here he was. This was *bad*. Really fucking bad because he didn’t know what to *do*.

“How does killing my whole family raise no questions? The fuck is wrong with you they have nothing to do with this!” Playing scared kid was his only shot. Hell, he wasn’t sure he

could have played it any other way if he tried.

“Look kid, there's two ways that this plays out,” the man sighed, looking bored. “Way number one: your entire family and everybody that ever gave a shit about you slowly start dying off in mysterious accidents over the next couple months. By the end of the year you have no support system and I arrange the paperwork to get you placed with someone that works for Schlatt. You “run away”,” he said with air quotes, “and nobody ever cares enough to find you again.”

Tommy's grip on the edge of the sink behind him tightened painfully. Unwanted images of more hospital visits and funerals flooded his mind, only to be replaced with the phantom pains of bloody noses and guardians' shouts ringing in his ears. He'd rather die than go back to that.

“Or way number two,” he continued, indicating with two raised fingers, “is you come willingly. You're still a foster kid with trust issues, your record indicates you as a huge flight risk. At the moment nobody knows we're after you, not the heroes, not the police, not your friends and family. If you run away now, they'll look but it will be so out of the blue they'll have no idea where to start and eventually give up. Either way you're getting to Schlatt before the new year, the only question is how much blood do you want on your hands?”

Tommy wasn't sure if he wanted to stab the guy with his own stupid knife or throw up. “I don't fucking—”

“Phil, Techno and Wilbur Watson,” he listed, counting on his fingers with the knife. “Niki Nihachu, Ranboo Beloved, Puffy Caprini, Clare Thomas, Robin, Bonnie *and* Clementine Dennis ,” he continued, wiggling all ten fingers. “All dead because of you. Honestly I bet I could throw Jeff Smith in there too, just for good measure. You really seemed to enjoy his gymnastics classes afterall. All that red on your hands that's completely avoidable.”

Tommy swallowed against the sudden dryness in his throat. Okay, yeah, he kind of wanted to throw up.

He opened his mouth, intending to cuss the man out or give some smart remark but his tongue stubbornly refused to comply. Eventually he grimaced and settled for glaring at the man, pretending like he wasn't starting to shake like a coward.

It was so fucking hard not to freak out. The man had obviously already proven his competence and willingness to follow through on the threats. The only reason Wilbur wasn't dead was a series of freak events. The only reason Phil was still alive was because the man ordered the shooting as a warning. And sure maybe Techno or Ranboo could defend themselves, but *Clementine* sure as fuck couldn't.

Tommy could try to end it here, to take this guy down and face the consequences of questions and concern. But he knew that nobody else was going to give him an out like this. The next guy they sent wouldn't even bother being subtle, wouldn't offer a ‘keep your loved ones safe’ card.

Everyone was in danger just because Tommy *existed*.

The man laughed at his inability to reply. “It’s alright kid, I know it’s a big decision. Tell you what, I’ll give you until after Thanksgiving to choose. That gives you a little over a week to call me with a yes. If I don’t hear from you by then, I’ll just assume it was a no and start planning all the horrible accidents to get the friends and family out of the way.”

He reached into his inner jacket pocket, trading the knife out for a black business card. He tossed the card in Tommy’s direction where it fluttered down to the tiled bathroom floor.

“Happy holidays kid.” And then he was unlocking the door and stepping out into the hall, closing the door behind him once more.

And then Tommy was alone in the single bathroom with the sound of the fluorescent lights buzzing faintly overhead and the black card waiting expectantly on the floor.

He shakily pushed away from the sink, finger aching with how hard he had been gripping onto the edge of it. He knelt down to retrieve the card from the floor. It had no name on it, just a phone number scrawled in silver marker.

The card was carefully tucked into his pocket as he turned to stare at his reflection in the mirror above the sink.

His gaze lingered on the basketball shorts Phil bought him and the blue sweatshirt Wilbur had picked out. He sighed, eyes dropping to stare at the grungy bathroom floor.

Everyone that he loved was in danger because of him, because of his powers. This was the thing that Memoir had warned him and Tubbo about since day one, the point of no return that every person with high level powers reached. Tommy had given it his best effort, he tried to cling to any shred of normalcy he could get his hands on, but of course in the end he had nothing to show for it.

Nothing good ever stays.

Gods, Tommy was going to miss them.

He took a steadying breath before pushing the door open into the quiet hall, no sign of the mercenary in sight. He paused by the vending machine, staring at the jammed Pringles can as he considered his options.

He had a week to figure out how to fix this, to find the solution that kept everyone safe and him out of Schlatt’s hands. Obviously he couldn’t spend that week tiptoeing around Techno and whatever Trigger-related secrets the man was hiding. Tommy *had* to leave, he had to keep them safe.

The smart thing would be to leave now, to walk out of the hospital without looking back. But he didn’t want to. He wanted to say goodbye, but he couldn’t tip them off either.

He frowned at the Pringles can, an idea popping into his head. They were observant enough, and if nothing else Wilbur would probably figure it out when he went to steal some chips as a joke.

Some haggling with the nearest nurses' station and three sticky notes later he returned to the vending machine, freeing the Pringles can with a swift elbow that rattled the whole machine. Tommy collected the armful of snacks, peeling the seal off the Pringles and stuffing the neon pink notes in along the edge of the stack of chips.

"See I told you he's fine," Wilbur said when Tommy pushed the door open with his hip, arms laden with junk food.

Tommy forced a cheeky grin. "Miss me much?" he said as he dumped the snack on the unoccupied bed, digging through them to toss Wilbur the chocolate-covered pretzels. Wilbur cheered victoriously and Phil sighed, leaning back against the head of the bed.

"What took you so long?" Techno asked, dark eyes studying Tommy like he was trying to dissect him with a look.

Tommy shrugged. "I got bored and went for a walk, didn't realize that was a crime." He tossed a Clif bar and a bag of veggie sticks Techno's way.

Techno frowned at the snacks. "Thanks," he said hesitantly.

"No problem," Tommy replied, throwing a bag of SunChips at Phil before scooping up his gym bag off the floor. As he feigned searching for something he palmed a chocolate bar and not so subtly passed it off to Wilbur when he shouldered the bag.

Across from them, Techno snorted and Phil signed.

"Where are you going now?" Techno asked, rolling his eyes.

"To put trousers on because it's bloody freezing is where," Tommy shot back with a grin that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Tommy you're not that slick, Will, don't eat that you shouldn't be eating sugar when they're still using healing powers on you."

"But Daaaad," Wilbur whined sarcastically, making Tommy laugh.

"See, look at what you've done Tommy, you're already giving me gray hairs," Phil complained, gesturing to Wilbur who was giving him puppy dog eyes.

Tommy couldn't help but laugh again as he made his way toward the exit. "It's just cause I love you so much *Dad*," he drawled in a teasing tone, winking as he was already halfway out the door. He smiled at the way Phil froze just as the door swung shut, hiding the rest of the man's reaction from sight.

He forced himself not to linger by the door and walked at a casual pace down the hallway. He bypassed the bathrooms, deciding getting out of the building before he changed his mind was more important than putting on trousers. He could change somewhere along the way.

If tears started to fall as he followed the signs towards the nearest exit, nobody he passed said anything. It wasn't uncommon to see people crying in hospitals after all.

Phil stared down at the small collection of sticky notes in his hand like they held the answers of the universe in the chicken scratch messages on them.

Around him the world went on, the hero commission processing office as crowded as usual and unaware of Phil's plights.

It had been three days since the last time anyone saw Tommy. Three days since Phil teared up when his youngest called him *dad* out of the blue. Three days since they realized Tommy was taking too long to change in the bathroom just down the hall. Three days since Wilbur spotted the pink paper inside of the can of chips on Tommy's bed. Three days since they found the footage of a strange man dragging Tommy into the bathroom at knifepoint. Three days since Tommy ran away under his own power.

Three days since the first time Phil read the sticky notes. Three small messages haphazardly scrawled across them at a nurses station just minutes before Tommy left. Phil had long since memorized them, but he read them over regardless, like there was some hidden meaning he hadn't caught yet.

Techno,

You were a good sparring partner. Maybe even the best.

Don't let them look for me, I'm not worth it.

Techno had glared at his note as Phil was now, searching for any kind of hidden meaning behind the words. Reading it over and over like there was something he was missing.

Wilbur,

You might be a lying dickhead sometimes, but you're also my brother.

I'm sorry I never worked up the courage to tell you.

Wilbur had practically screamed himself hoarse, so inconsolable that the doctors were forced to sedate him before he aggravated any more of his injuries.

Phil,

There's been a lot of men in my life that called themselves my dad.

None of them ever made me want to claim them as such.

You changed that, I'm just sorry I'm not good enough to be a real son.

Phil's eyes burned the first time he read it, but didn't have the time to process it when Wilbur started to panic. It finally sank in as he sat by a sedated Wilbur's bedside, trying to ignore the phantom weight of Tommy's head on his shoulder, shaking with every muffled sob.

Had he been planning this? They never got to have a real conversation about what caused the boy's breakdown in the first place. Was he crying as he planned his escape or was there more?

Unfortunately, no matter what compelled the teen to write the notes, they were undeniably goodbye messages.

Whatever game Tommy was playing, he didn't want it to include them anymore.

"We should have told him," Techno said once the security footage confirmed Tommy had left under his own power. "If he knew who we were, he might have stayed. He was hanging around us so much for protection, he's probably leaving because he thinks he has to protect us."

Phil frowned, remembering Techno's unconfirmed lead about a gang hunting the teen. He thought back on the suspicious car that had been hanging around the neighbourhood for the last few weeks with a twinge of regret. He had been putting it off and now Tommy was gone. If the car was absent when he returned home that night he'd know it was his fault.

"I guess we'll never know," he replied. "All we can do now is get him back."

Techno scoffed. "And how exactly are you going to do that mister retiree?"

"Tempest?" one of the secretaries called out over the busy office din.

For a moment the room nearly quieted, much of the attention drawn to Phil as he stood, wings unfurling from where he had been curled in the corner of the waiting area.

It wasn't surprising that nobody had noticed his presence. He wasn't wearing his full armoured costume, only a long black coat over a green dress shirt and dark slacks. The only thing vaguely disguising his face was the red sunglasses he borrowed from Wilbur, almost an homage to his costume's red visor.

As far as the world was concerned Tempest had taken an extended leave of absence. Nobody had seen the hero in almost six months, with tabloids already having run through their rumours of his retirement months ago. His official presence at any event that wasn't a retirement announcement would be completely unexpected.

He moved towards the main receptionist desk and life returned to the office, though more subdued as many eyes curiously followed the hero's activity.

He offered the receptionist a thin smile when he reached her desk. "Well?"

She offered him a bright grin, holding up a large manila envelope with the hero commission logo stamped across the middle. "Your application for a hero license renewal was approved," she said, handing him the package. "Welcome back to active duty, sir."

Chapter End Notes

Was that good? I hope it was good, I got very excited writing it.

Okay, okay, so I know I said the pacing would pick up after the last chapter but I rewrote this whole thing so now it starts to pick up after this one. I swear. Probably.

Of course, if you've made it this far leave a kudos and a comment, I love to see people's reactions!

(Also Knight if you're reading this I'm calling you out because I think its funny :)

Act II

Chapter Summary

The more things in Tommy's life change, the more they stay the same.

Tempest returns to duty.

Chapter Notes

Okay! It's not really that relevant for this chapter but I made some edits to the earlier chapters including giving *Crumb* the vigilante name "*Amnesia*". Most of the edits were small and just to cover up stupid plot holes or loose ends so you might notice those if you're ever rereading.

That said you might notice this chapter is a bit unusual but I think I liked how it turned out.

Thank you all for the lovely comments on the last chapter and for your continued support on this project, I wouldn't say the end is in sight but it's not *not* in sight, so I'm very excited.

Chapter Content Warning: Child abuse, typical levels of violence

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy stared down at the adoption papers where they sat, framed by red tissue paper in the flat gift box that they had been delivered in.

“Well?” Vince Sheppard asked, excitement and anticipation painting his features as his wife gripped his arm.

“What do you say, Tom?” Victoria said, eyes bright in the dining room’s ambiance.

Tommy looked between his foster parents and the adoption papers in front of him. He looked at the rest of the table, covered in the birthday gifts he already opened and the remainder of the chocolate cake, the one and three shaped candles lying on the edge of the plate.

In all honesty, he felt a little trapped. They hadn’t even asked him about adoption up until this point, they had no discussions or indications that they were even considering it.

The Sheppards' house was nice, they were kind and made sure he had all the necessities but it wasn't remarkably different from any of the middle-class homes he had lived in. Wasn't a forever home supposed to feel different? Or was that just something older kids said to make him feel better after getting dropped in another group home?

Either way, Tommy wasn't about to show his discomfort. This was all he ever dreamed of, right? He was getting *adopted*. This was supposed to be the happiest day of his life, so why weren't his emotions getting with the program?

"Thomas?" Vince said, brows pinched in growing concern. "Everything alright?"

"Yes," Tommy replied quietly before clearing his throat. "Yes," he forced a bright smile and felt as the excitement began to catch up in his chest. "Yes, yes, yes a thousand times *yes!*"

Victoria cheered and Vince laughed heartily as Tommy threw himself out of his chair and into their waiting embrace. Into his *parents'* arms. Tommy could never remember having parents, but he would from now on.

Vince scooped Tommy up out of their group hug and crushed him in a bear hug, announcing that the rest of the day would be a marathon of all of their favourite movies as their first family tradition.

As they settled down on the worn couch, piled high with blankets and laden with bowls of candy and popcorn, Tommy wondered if he would get to call them Mom and Dad now.

It was only two weeks later that he awoke to screaming.

Most kids raised like Tommy would run at any sign of trouble like that. Someone who had been in the system as long as him would know that when someone's screaming bloody murder like that, you'd best be gone by the time the one causing it comes looking for you.

But Tommy wasn't like most other kids, Tommy was a protector by nature. Whenever someone was hurting, he ran towards the sound. And if he couldn't stop whoever was hurting them, he'd just turn the attention on himself and take the hit for them.

It was pure muscle memory that had him sprinting into the kitchen before he even had a chance to think it through. Logically, Tommy knew he was the only kid in the house, and somewhere in his brain he knew there was more than one voice yelling and the screaming didn't sound like Vince's voice, but he found himself hovering in the kitchen doorway nonetheless.

There was a man lying on the island, screaming his head off as another man and Victoria shouted at each other and scrambled to press dishrags against one of his legs and stomach. Tommy's stomach churned at the way red soaked into the white rags, he had never seen someone bleed so much before.

The sound of the backdoor slamming open made him violently flinch. Tommy quickly whirled to see Vince and another stranger hauling two gagged figures towards the kitchen, handguns pointed at the people's heads.

“Move Thomas,” Vince grunted, catching Tommy in the head with an elbow when he was too slow to clear the doorway.

Vince had never hit Tommy before, yet, just like that, the fact was changed so casually.

Under normal circumstances, the idea of his now legal father hurting him would have been enough to make Tommy scream or cry in betrayal, but this was not normal circumstances. Tommy was a little too distracted to freak out about an elbow to the temple when he met the gaze of the person Vince was dragging into the house.

The girl let out a strangled sob as she was shoved to her knees, pistol clicking as it rested against her forehead. Vince’s gaze was solely focused on their other captive as the second gunman threw him none too gently against the kitchen floor.

“Any funny business and I shoot her,” Vince told the man, who laid on the floor with a glazed look in his eyes.

The horrific implications of the sentence shook Tommy to his core. He had never seen someone threaten murder so casually, so calm and collected.

In his experience death threats followed drunken beatdowns and explosive arguments, not— not whatever the fuck this was.

“What the *fuck?!* ” he found himself shouting, risking a step further into the kitchen.

Vince sighed and fixed Tommy with a glare. “Go back to your room Tom,” he ordered. “We can talk about this in the morning.”

“The *fuck* we will,” he practically snarled, defiance sparking weakly with his urge to *protect* . “What the fuck are you doing?! You— you’re kidnapping people and threatening to shoot them? What the hell are—”

“*Thomas!*” he roared, cutting off Tommy’s panicked rambling.

The effect was immediate and nearly physical as Tommy flinched and stumbled backwards, slamming painfully into the doorway. His heart was racing as the words caught in his throat, nearly strangling him when dozens of unpleasant memories flooded his head.

This shouldn’t have been as bad as it was. Tommy had been in a home where they beat him within an inch of his life, had seen other kids try to kill themselves or overdose just to escape the never-ending struggle. But Tommy had never had a family before, he had never had a father to hit him or scream at him when he was misbehaving. And now he did. Vince wasn’t just another foster parent because he was Tommy’s *dad* now.

Tommy’s dad, who was threatening to shoot a teenage girl in the kitchen and screaming at Tommy for refusing to walk away.

This was *worse*. This was worse than any foster home because it wasn’t temporary anymore. This was Tommy’s *family*. Tommy’s family that was dragging in an injured screaming man

and two hogtied avian-hybrids at two in the morning. His father, who just casually hit him in the head when he didn't move fast enough.

Tommy must have been fucking cursed. He could *never* have a happy home life, could he?

He had thought adoption papers would be the key to a normal life, to one where he didn't have to watch bruised girls sob on kitchen floors as men threatened to hurt them again. Who could have guessed that he was so wrong?

Vince took in the boy's silence before collecting himself with a deep breath. "Look Tom, I'm sorry, really. This isn't how this night was supposed to go at all. I wanted to keep you out of this life until you were old enough to make your own decisions, but here we are. So if you know what's good for you, just go back to your room and we'll talk about this in the morning, okay?"

Tommy's shivered where he stood, frozen in place.

He could just go back to his room, he could put in headphones and blast music on his new phone he got for his birthday, pretending like nothing was happening. He could wake up the next morning to a clean kitchen and a warm breakfast and kind voices apologizing for scaring him.

He met the girl's eyes again, hazel and covered in smudged makeup that ran down her cheeks in muddy tear tracks. She looked as scared as Tommy felt.

"*Dad—*" he protested, voice cracking painfully.

It wasn't fair, it wasn't fair, it wasn't *fair*. Why? Why did love have to be conditional? Why could his stupid brain just let it go, just walk away without playing hero for once? Why couldn't he just be *happy*?

Vince sighed, lowering the gun from the girl's head. He looked at the man standing over the other captive. "Watch the girl," he commanded before stepping around her towards Tommy, face carved with obvious disappointment.

Tommy tried to protest again but only managed a pathetic squeak as the man grabbed him by the hair, roughly tugging him towards the door.

His first instinct should have been to go limp, to follow and obey and avoid causing any more trouble when the man with the gun was already mad at him. But one last look at the unbridled terror in the avian girl's eyes made him follow the most natural instinct he had: doing something reckless.

Tommy snarled defiantly, hand's flying up to pry the fingers from his hair as he twisted away and ran further into the kitchen. His eyes locked on the knife block that had been knocked to the floor to make room for the man on the counter.

"Thomas stop!" Vince barked, dress shoes skidding against the floor as he turned after Tommy. "Stop him!"

It was a fucking shit show, to say the least.

Tommy sprinted towards the middle of the room, deftly avoiding both the second gunman and the man by the counter as they lunged at him. He danced around the first attack and quickly dropped to the floor to avoid the second man, ignoring the burn on his knees that came with sliding across the tile.

His momentum carried him across the floor just long enough to get him within reach of the fallen knives. Snatching one up he took an inexperienced swing at the moustached man attempting to make another grab for him. Luckily it worked just long enough for Tommy to scramble back in the girls direction.

The click of the handgun's safety had Tommy freezing in his tracks as Vince levelled the gun at the girl again.

"Don't make me do this T—" he was cut off by a choked grunt as the girl suddenly pushed off the ground, ramming her shoulder into Vince's stomach and smacking the gun from his hand with her one free wing.

Tommy found himself grinning despite the gnawing fear in every fibre of his being. He quickly moved again, meeting the girl halfway as she managed to scramble away from a winded Vince.

Now to give credit where credit is due: Vince Sheppard kept his knives sharp. In a single slice, the rope around the girl's torso gave way like butter and she finished the job by snapping her large white wings open to send it flying.

She reached a hand up to wrestle the gag from her mouth. "Fuckin' back off," she snarled, literally hissing as the moustached man tried to inch closer.

For a moment nobody moved, the girl's wings were still wide and created a barrier between Tommy and the adults in the kitchen.

"Last chance kids," Vince huffed out, his face a cold mask of anger, "don't make me hurt you."

Ever impulsive, Tommy's mouth moved without his brain. "Sorry, I'm not the biggest fan of murders," he spat back.

"Well then, you must not be a very big fan of having a roof over your head," Vince countered with a sneer. "No wonder you were in the system for so long, there's really no fixing stupid."

Tommy's chest clenched painfully. *Family* huh? What a fucking cruel joke the universe kept playing on him.

Anger tried to worm its way up his throat and into his heart, but it never fully formed as cold, hard *despair* drowned it out. What was the fucking point of believing in something as fantastical as *family* when the world proved to him again and again that it wasn't for him

Never again, he promised himself. *Lesson learned, never trust again.*

He tried his best to shove down the storm brewing in his chest, reaching for the anger on behalf of the girl he was trying to save.

“Fuck you,” Tommy tried to spit back, but it sounded pathetically weak even to his own ears.

Vince snarled as he reached into the pocket of his blood-stained slacks and retrieved a switchblade. The knife sprung out with a threatening click as Vince's eyes began to glow yellow.

Tommy grit his teeth. He hated guys that carried switchblades, it was usually a telltale sign of overcompensation when an open assist would do just fine and *not* be illegal to carry.

“It’s okay Tom, I’ve still got a few lessons to teach you yet. Besides, you’ll be no use to anyone if you’re *dead*. ”

Tommy grit his teeth, bracing for the inevitable.

Vince’s powers activated as the glow flared brighter, an invisible grip latching onto Tommy and *pulling*. The girl yelped as the telekinesis took hold of her as well, throwing her brutally across the room and into the china cabinet with the loud crashing of broken glass.

Vince’s power dragged Tommy forward until he had the young teen by the throat, knife pressed against his cheek and cutting through the skin immediately.

Tommy hardly flinched though, leaning into Vince’s grip and activating his own powers. He watched with dark satisfaction as the yellow glow was abruptly cut off and Vince’s eyes widened in confusion and fear.

“The fuck did you—” he didn’t get to finish as Tommy twisted awkwardly and managed land a decent uppercut, shutting the man up with a loud clack of teeth as he narrowly avoided biting off his own tongue.

He dropped Tommy in surprise but recovered quicker than the boy did, immediately lunging for him again, switchblade still in hand.

In the three years following that night, Tommy would suffer from enough minor and major stab wounds that he would eventually stop counting. However, in his memories, the feeling of Vince Sheppard’s knife digging into his shoulder would always hurt the worst, like the axis point upon which Tommy’s whole life was flipped upside down.

They hit the floor hard, Vince not bothering to pull his weight as he landed on Tommy, the knife digging deeper. Tommy cried out as his nerves were set on fire, his left hand spasming as white-hot pins and needles raced up his neck all the way down to his fingertips.

“Give me back my powers you little shit,” Vince snarled, twisting the knife and making Tommy scream.

He heaved for a second, using what little coherence he had left to focus on not dropping his hold against Vince’s powers. The knife shifted in his shoulder with every breath, making his hand spasm weakly. Distantly he realized he couldn’t feel his pinky or ring fingers.

“Fuck— you,” Tommy wheezed, trying his best to sneer at the man.

Vince’s eyes narrowed in a withering glare before he leaned back, yanking the knife out with a painful twist. He leaned back, raising the knife life he was going for another stab but didn’t get the chance as Tommy made his move.

Apparently, two months of middle school wrestling weren’t completely useless in a life or death situation. Tommy noted how the man’s weight was set heavily against his stomach, not his hips. He took advantage of the man's unknowing mistake, bucking into an arch and sending Vince headfirst into the floor as Tommy scrambled out from underneath him.

Across the room, he met the girl's eyes as she shook the broken glass from her wings. He really hoped the look they shared meant they had the same idea.

Behind him, Vince was stumbling back to his feet but Tommy was already moving again, the open wound in his shoulder momentarily forgotten as he made a break for the still half open back door.

There was shouting and cursing from multiple voices but Tommy only dared to look back to see if the girl was following. She was stumbling a few steps behind, one arm reaching out desperately towards Tommy.

Tommy’s heart leapt into his throat as he saw Vince retrieving his gun from the floor, standing to level it in their direction.

Tommy didn’t hesitate to reach back, taking her hand in his right one and dragging her through the door after him.

Gunfire rang out behind them, nearly deafening at such close range. Tommy’s heart raced as he *swore* he felt something wizz by his head but he didn’t dare stop moving to check.

They broke out into the back yard and Tommy didn’t hesitate to sprint across the small patch of grass to the fence that separated them from the neighbours. They scrambled over the fence as more shots rang out and stumbled across the next lawn out towards the street.

Lights started to flicker on in the nearby houses. This was a nice neighbourhood in the suburbs, gunfire was bound to draw attention.

Neither of the kids spoke. The only sounds filling the night were the slap of their bare feet against the concrete and the fading sounds of adults arguing somewhere. Nearby the muffled cry of a baby bled into the quiet night as more house lights flicked on.

The sound of police sirens in the distance became apparent and the girl gripped Tommy’s hand tighter.

“Where are we goin’?” The girl finally asked, still following Tommy as they navigated through the streets and yards of the suburbs.

“We’re going to hide,” Tommy replied, breath heaving. He wasn’t sure how much longer his adrenaline would keep him going.

The girl said nothing else, simply nodding and continuing to follow Tommy, hands still tightly clasped.

“You’re bleedin’ a good bit,” she whispered, hand pressed against the stab wound in Tommy’s shoulder.

They were in a drainage tunnel, where the river flowed underground into the tunnel systems beneath the city only to re-emerge on the other side.

“We should call the cops and get you to a hospital—”

“No,” Tommy said before his mind could catch up. Why did he say no? She was right, what else was he supposed to do about a stab wound?

Teary blue eyes met bloodshot hazel and found a pained look of understanding.

“You don’t want to turn them in, do you?”

He had no doubt that Vince would be able to talk his way around the cops, the girl could probably guess as much based on their locale.

Gangsters didn’t get to move to the suburbs without getting good at lying and hiding things. They couldn’t become foster parents with any records of violence.

Tommy’s heart ached at the thought, why would they take such a risk in the first place unless they really wanted a kid? Why couldn’t he just be good enough for the family that wanted him?

Tommy shuddered with a suppressed sob, a fresh wave of tears pushing against the floodgates. Pain laced through his arm from jostling the stab wound. “They were supposed to be my *family*,” he whispered, like it was a secret, like being quiet would take away from the devastation of it.

The little remaining anger there was fading. Family wasn’t supposed to be a joke or a cruel trick. The deepest, darkest parts of Tommy’s soul *craved* family, yet every time he thought he had it, he let it slip through his fingers.

The tunnel was quiet for a moment, save for the rushing water around their knees and the frogs and crickets singing in the warm spring night. The world was all too calm for the night the two children had just been through.

“I would’a just gone back to my room,” she admitted sadly. “I’ve actually done it before. My dad...he is— was, probably— a lot like yours. Nice until he wasn’t. He had a man in the basement one time— I just walked away.”

Tommy weakly lifted his head at the confession, too curious to see how she felt about that fact. All he saw was a pinched expression, pained for sure— maybe regret or confusion.

“Why didn’t you walk away?” she whispered, eyes digging into Tommy’s like she could read the answer through them.

“I don’t leave people when they need help,” he said automatically. “I can’t look at someone in danger and walk away without trying.”

She nearly laughed, though the sound seemed to catch in her throat. “Simple as that?” she asked, voice shaking.

Chewed at his lip for a moment, searching for any other answer. “Does it have to be complicated?” he replied. Did there have to be a reason other than wanting to help?

This time she laughed like she couldn’t believe it. “You crazy fuckin’ bastard, you don’t even know my name and you just gave up your whole life for me.”

“What’s your name then?” he asked, managing a small smirk.

She laughed quietly again. “Beautie, but you can call me Beau.”

Tommy smiled wider, ignoring the pounding headache starting to build as the adrenaline faded. “Well, in that case, you’re welcome Beau. My name’s Tommy.”

Beau smiled gently, but the sadness never quite escaped her eyes. “Thank you for saving me, Tommy.”

Tommy probably should have walked away the moment the villain fight broke out, but the second he caught a glimpse of white and black wings, his eyes refused to tear themselves away.

He stood on the edge of the growing crowd behind the police barricade, watching the heroes at a distance with an aching sadness.

He had no doubt that the hero intern is actually Beau, it's been a few years, but she’s one of the heroes that wears no mask, only a pair of green safety goggles not dissimilar to her mentor, Tempest’s. Her hair was dyed now, half bleached half dark, and her nose more noticeably crooked like it had healed poorly after a bad break.

She looked happy, excitedly recounting her part of the battle to the affiliate-level hero that accompanied their large patrol group.

Tempest was across the block with the two other interns, helping load the villain into the armoured police transport. Tommy hadn’t heard anything about the hero since his rumoured retirement months ago, but there he was, black wings and blonde hair shining in the sun in a familiar way that made Tommy’s heart ache. He hoped the pro-hero would stay over there, Tommy was pretty sure he might break down crying if the man ended up looking any more like Phil up close.

The guilt was still too fresh, open and raw like a wound about to fester. Hopefully if he never saw them again the feeling would eventually fade, left to collect dust with all his other regrets.

He forced his gaze back to Beau, remembering their conversation in the river tunnel just a short few years ago. “*I can’t look at someone in danger and walk away without trying,*” he had told her. Yet Tommy had been fully prepared to walk away, whether or not the heroes arrived. And there she was, stepping in to save people whose names she didn’t even know.

He was proud, he realized. He and the avian girl had never kept in touch, but they had a deep understanding that Tommy had never been able to place.

Envious too, perhaps, as something darker reared its head. The world never gave him the chance to really help people, not like the chance she had now.

Hazel eyes caught blue and Tommy turned to walk away.

He had to keep moving anyway, the longer he stayed in one place the more likely someone would catch up. Whether it's the heroes and police searching for a runaway or the villains and criminals chasing after their prize.

If Tommy got caught talking to anyone, it would put them in danger. No need to risk the poor girl's life again when she was doing just fine for herself now.

The sound of wingbeats caught up with him before he makes it a full two blocks away. He sighed but couldn’t find it in himself to run or hide, he’s done enough of that over the last four days and she *probably* wouldn’t turn him in. Hopefully.

He turned into the nearest empty alley to wait, watching as two-toned hair and white wings glided down with a grace unbecoming of the dingy, garbage-filled space.

Beau stared from behind her green vizor for a good minute before she spoke. “*It is you,*” she said after a moment.

“In the flesh,” Tommy answered, trying to hide his exhaustion behind a smile. “I like your costume, it's very...green and black.” Up close it reminded him of Haywire’s iconic jacket and he smiled at the thought, knowing she’d once met Tubbo yet had no idea.

She had the good grace to at least snort at his poor attempt at humour before she smiles in earnest. “I’m *so* glad to see you’ve lost none of your *el-o-quence*,” she jokes, over pronouncing the syllables sarcastically.

Tommy chuckled weakly. “Well you know me, *classy* is my middle name,” he shrugged with a small smile. She huffed a small laugh in return.

They stare at each other again, an awkward silence settling.

“You look like shit,” she said eventually, just as blunt as he remembered. “Anything I can do to help? Ya know, since I’m a hero and all now, I just...can’t walk away without trying.”

Tommy ignored the way his throat burned at the call back. Of course she would remember that conversation as well as he did. It was definitely a turning point in Tommy's life, probably Beau's too.

"I'll be alright," he said, wishing it didn't feel like a lie even in his own mouth, "I appreciate the offer though." He tried to ignore the way her face fell just a little bit. "And I'm glad," he added, "that you don't walk away anymore. You can help a lot of people that way."

That sad quality crept back into her smile as she answered, "You could help a lot of people if you still wanted to," she says. "I can't think of a better power to use against this Trigger shite that's been poppin' up all over."

Tommy resists the urge to grimace. He almost forgot she was on the short list of people that knew about Tommy's powers. Of course she was smart enough to really just hit the nail on the head in a three minute conversation.

"I'm not much of a fighter these days," he replied, hoping it'd be enough to end the conversation there. "I better get going. Places to be, people to see, you know?" He offered her one last smile before turning to leave.

"Tommy—" he froze at the feeling of a gloved hand closing around his wrist.

He sighed and turned to look at her over his shoulder. "Beau—"

"At least let me give you my number," she cut him off. He blinked, lips twitching slightly as her face reddened, no doubt realizing her phrasing. "Not— not like that asshole. Just— I know there's probably no convincin' you to let me help you now, but at least have a way to contact me later, you know?"

Tommy couldn't stop from biting his lip as he turned away from her again, but made no move to pull his wrist away. "I said I'll be fine," he protested weakly. He wasn't going to be fine, but the last thing he wanted was to make it Beau's problem too.

"Okay, but when it turns out you're *not* fine, call me. I won't get any official heroes involved if you don't want me to, promise." She tugs his wrist a little more insistently and he turns with it, watching curiously as she produced a Sharpie from her utility belt and gently scribbled the digits across the inside of his wrist.

Still, she didn't release his arm as the marker was returned to its mysterious heroic pen holder. They stared at each other for a long moment, Tommy's ears half expecting to hear frogs peeping in the distance under the sounds of the busy city.

Then he was abruptly tugged into a hug, Beau's arms wrapping around his torso and squeezing tight enough to make it slightly uncomfortable. And oh how Tommy loathed the part of his brain that felt her wings curl around him and screamed *safety*. Wings were *safe*, a barrier between him and the world that he always longed for yet was so rarely given.

Fuck Tommy missed Phil.

In his whole life, Tommy had called two men *dad*. One of them tried to kill him five minutes later and the other never offered him anything but love, safety, and a comforting wing around his shoulder. Either way, Tommy ran from them both in the end.

Despite himself his arms gently settled around the avian's shoulders, returning the hug as he stubbornly ignored the tears threatening to burn his eyes.

"I became a hero because of you, you know," she said. "After I left you with that kid, I never heard anything about you again. I thought you were dead."

Tommy was *not* going to cry, he was a big man and big men didn't cry in front of pretty women. Plus, Tommy was fucking *tired* of crying. Even if he had every reason, like that fact that he nearly got Wilbur and Phil killed then ran away without an explanation. Like the fact that he used to be so much better, he used to save people without a second thought. He used to *inspire* people apparently. But Tommy *refused* to fucking cry right now.

"I really need to go, Beau," he said, gently pushing her shoulders to break away from the hug. "I'm glad to see you doing so well, really."

The expression on her face was caught somewhere between annoyance and tears as she opened her mouth to speak again, only to be cut off by another voice.

"*Venus!*" Tommy grimaced at the familiar voice. He didn't have time to catch up with more friends right now.

Without another word to Beau, he tugged his hood up over his head and turned toward the opposite end of the alley, moving as quickly as he could without running.

"There you are, what the— wait who is that?"

"You'd better fuckin' call me if you run into actual trouble, Tommy!" Beau shouted after him.

Tommy risked a final glance of his shoulder as he turned the corner. He shot Beau a weak smile and made eye contact with the new figure standing next to her in the middle of the alley.

Eryn Streams stared back at him, eyes going wide with recognition. He was similarly decked out in hero gear, though with all the red and black armour mixed with his demon hybrid features he honestly looked more like a classic cartoon villain. Tommy's smile widened just a little bit more. It seemed that all his old friends were doing good without him.

"Tommy!—"

Whatever else Eryn was going to say was lost as Tommy rounded the corner and broke into a sprint, moving deeper and deeper into the city.

He had a plan. It wasn't a particularly good one, but it was better than nothing. Either way, he had until Thanksgiving Day to make it count. Hopefully, four more days would be enough.

Then he could worry about catching up and making amends. If he was still alive to do so.

Tempest and Poodwattle finally found their trio of interns in an alley two and a half blocks from the edge of the police barricade.

Phil was very close to his tolerance of bullshit for the day and the rowdy interns were not helping. Pood at least seemed to notice and was doing his best to keep the kids out from underfoot but the three of them vanishing without a word wasn't something he could just ignore. At the end of the day they were good kids, but they were far from the only thing weighing on the hero at the moment.

Of course, his agency's media team had demanded that Tempest's return be heavily publicized, which Phil immediately fought against and managed to compromise on a public patrol with the interns. Still, it was Tempest's first official day back and they still had two hours left on the patrol before he could even *think* about getting away to aid in the search for Tommy.

The search itself had been depressingly sparse. Nobody could identify who the man with the knife was and all they knew was that Tommy had left through the hospital's front entrance by himself. After his first official 24 hours missing, they had every available police officer and affiliate hero in the city on the case but only 48 hours later it was declared a lost cause.

In most cases, if the runaway child didn't show up or return in the first 72 hours, it was a waste of time and resources. Somebody even had the audacity to tell Phil that if they were lucky a body would wash up within the week. The only thing that kept Phil from punching that detective was Techno's steady grip on his arm, a silent warning.

Half of the pros in their immediate social circle were out of commission, many of them either hospitalized or MIA. That being the case, the investigation was currently being run like any other missing persons — which was to say it wasn't. There was a passive missing persons report detailing Tommy as a runaway foster child and nothing else.

So to say that Phil was at his wits end would be a bit of an understatement. It was only years of training as both a hero and a father that protected the interns for the tongue-lashing of a lifetime once they were found.

Still, they were about to get an earful until their bickering reached his ears, making both the heroes freeze at the mouth of the alley.

“And you're *sure* it was Tommy,” Aegis stressed, his mouth set in a hard frown as his brows pulled together.

“He looked me dead in the fucking eyes Freddie, I think I'd fucking recognize someone that I've known since we were fucking *primary* schoolers,” Cyberonix shot back, tension obvious in both his tone and stance.

“Prime, fine! Excuse me for being a little skeptical about a sighting of the guy that we haven’t heard from in three years and assumed was dead. Not like we asked Mania to use her powers to look for him or anything.”

“Aimsey’s powers are inconsistent at best and everyone knows it,” Cyberonix said, rolling his eyes with a snarl that showed off his wicked fangs.

Further into the alley Venus finally moved, speaking as she turned to face them. “Look it doesn’t matter if it’s the same Tommy or not, he’s definitely *my* friend and I think he’s in some serious—” her words abruptly cut off as she looked past her bickering classmates and met Phil’s eyes. “H—hey Tempest. How long have you been standing there?”

“Which way did he go?” Phil demanded in lieu of an answer.

A kid named Tommy who might be in serious trouble? That was the closest thing to a goddamn lead anybody had given him since the boy vanished.

She blinked at his harsh tone, wings curling tight against her back in discomfort. Any other day Phil would probably feel bad about that, but not at that moment.

“He went left at the mouth of the alley, but if you go after him he’ll probably run... you don’t even know what we’re talking about though—”

Phil didn’t stay to hear the rest, almost immediately backing out of the alley in order to get enough room to take to the air.

Every muscle in his wings ached to fly faster but he paced himself, knowing that it would be all too easy to miss something if he just blew by. Phil reached out with his powers, sensing the air as it moved through the crowds of pedestrians going about their day. The wind picked up with his guidance and started to blow the hats and hoods from people’s heads.

A flash of blonde caught his eye and he swore the face he saw quickly turning away was Tommy. Just as he was about to angle his wings to descend, gunshots and shouting rang out, quickly followed by the sound of metal crashing and glass shattering.

“Tempest! The villain escaped using a dose of Trigger!” Poodwattle’s voice crackled in his communicator not a moment. *“We could really use your help back here!”*

The gunfire had many of the pedestrians running immediately, including the blonde figure as he tugged the hood back over his head.

Phil grit his teeth. He couldn’t just let Tommy go if it was really him, but he also couldn’t leave Pood and the interns to fend for themselves.

Wingbeats behind him nearly made the hero growl as Venus pulled ahead of him and stopped, forcing Phil to stop instead of running into her.

“Venus—”

“Look I don’t know what’s up with you an’ Tommy but he’ll be fine on his own for a bit,” she cut him off. “The people back there *aren’t* goin’ ta be if we don’t go back to help ‘em.”

Phil sighed harshly. “He’s been missing for *days*,” he argued, still looking past her to try and see which direction he ran.

“Tommy’s a badass,” she said confidently. “Between his powers and his stubbornness, there’s not many people that could take him out if they wanted to. But—” she stopped abruptly, eyes widening almost comically, “*holy fuckin’ shite what the fuck!*”

Phil twisted to see what it was and found his own jaw dropping at the sheer size of the vines beginning to wrap around one of the tall apartment buildings where they had originally fought the villain. It was *ridiculous*, before the man had just been creating vines the width of power lines yet somehow the trigger boosted his powers enough to look like something straight out of a children's fairy tale.

Then what the intern was saying finally clicked in his brain, making him whip back around to stare at her. “*Powers?* The Tommy I know doesn’t have powers.”

She blinked, obviously confused as she tore her gaze from the apartment building. “Maybe they’re different Tommys then,” she said absently, though her distraction was understandable. “My Tommy can cancel out other people’s powers— I’m, uh, I’m gonna go help with that. I really think you should come too.” With a couple of powerful flaps of her wings, she was soaring off, leaving Phil behind to wrestle with his confusion.

Cancel out other people's *powers*? That sounded like the kind of ability the powers registration act would highly regulate, that it was *designed* to regulate. If someone like that went missing, his Tommy or not, it would be put as a top priority case. And maybe they were different people, but he *swore* he saw his kid somewhere in the crowd of pedestrians.

On the other hand, power neutralization was unheard of, but it wouldn’t be a hard one to hide depending on how it presented. Could...could Tommy have been hiding powers this whole time? Was that what was missing here? It would certainly explain the unanswered questions about a gang supposedly being after him—

The distant sound of an explosion drew Phil’s attention back to the matter at hand. He turned to see the smoke now rising from where the police and the rest of his patrol group were most likely on the defensive against the villain.

Phil risked one last look at the quickly emptying streets and cursed. Tommy was long gone by now, anyway, so the decision was made for him.

Buffeting the winds around him, Tempest shot through the air and back into the fray. It seemed that his publicity team was going to get their huge return debut after all.

Look at that! Bet you thought some of those other plots were dead huh?

I don't think you guys are prepared for the next chapter, it's the first draft is almost 10.5K and I just couldn't bring myself to split it up. You guys are in for it next week.

Also to clarify while the edits I made were small, some of them were to better foreshadow future plots or events, so it wouldn't be the *worst* time for a reread. That said everything should still make sense without a reread, I just know some readers are big on details. I made it through the first ten chapters with edits but there shouldn't be much more because I got a beta for the chapters after that.

Anyway! thanks for reading, leave a kudos and comment if you've made it this far, I love to see what everyone's thinking!

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Tubbo contemplates his choices.

Tempest and the patrol team scramble to handle the Trigger powered villain.

Chapter Notes

This is part one of two of a double update!

I asked Twitter to decide and they voted for part one tonight and part two tomorrow! So don't blame me for any cliffhangers >:)

Both these chapters will be kind of short but the original draft was just too long to be one chapter so this is just how it worked out.

Thanks for all the wonderful comments and love, sorry I don't answer a lot but I do read and love every single one <3.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tubbo chewed at his nails, nervously staring at the green call button on his phone. The number mocked him as he contemplated his choices.

He shouldn't be dragging Ranboo back into this, but he was fairly certain the other ex-vigilante would involve himself sooner or later. With everyone else running around dealing with the fallout of Tubbo's betrayal of Schlatt, there weren't many other options.

He was saved from having to make the final decision as the apartment door was pushed open revealing Eret, sunglasses in place to hide their distinctive eyes.

Eret offered him a small smile. "Hey, how was school?" they asked before moving further into the apartment to ditch their bags.

"Good," Tubbo answered loud enough for his voice to carry. "One of my friends from the prep class officially transferred to the hero course."

"Oh-ho, that's unusual," Eret said in a curious tone. "Who was it?"

Tubbo looked at the phone one last time before locking the screen. “Crumb Cup-Toast,” he replied.

He turned to look out the window and down at the street where Tempest and his patrol group were cleaning up the last of a small bank robbery. He snorted when he spotted Eryn and Freddie bickering with a paramedic who seemed to be trying to convince Eryn that the injury on his arm needed medical attention.

“Crumb...she’s Captain Sparklez new intern right? Calico?” Eret asked, joining Tubbo at the window with a manilla file in his hand.

Tubbo frowned at the Warden Agency logo on the file. “Yeah, he was her sponsor for the transfer application.”

Eret snorted, pushing the sunglasses off his face to rest in his long hair. “They’re not being very subtle,” they chuckled. “Amnesia’s fighting style was always very unique and it's hard for them to hide their chemistry. There’s no pretending like they haven’t trained together for years.”

Tubbo smirked. “That’s what I told them when she brought up the idea to me, but nobody’s called them out so far.” His gaze shifted to meet Erets blank eyes. “Unless you’re planning on turning them in, that is.”

They grinned. “No, of course not. I doubt anyone will make any official moves against them, but rumours travel fast. It’s not like anybody called for a suspension after Sparklez teamed with her during that first Trigger incident a few months ago. From what I hear, even Dream looked the other way there.”

“Yeah, Crumb has that effect on people,” Tubbo smiled, only half-joking. “Besides, it's hardly the first time a vigilante’s gone hero.”

Eret laughed again at that. “No, definitely not.”

The two of them watched as the proceedings on the street below began to wrap up in silence before Tubbo turned to make his way back towards the kitchen.

“Any word on Tempest’s missing kid?” Tubbo asked casually as he opened the fridge, hunting for some leftovers to snack on.

Eret was quiet for a minute and Tubbo looked to find them frowning at him. “No, how did you hear about that?”

“Rumours travel fast,” Tubbo answered coyly with a shrug.

The Blade had been the one to bring it to him. And boy Tubbo had never felt more stupid than he had the moment he realized that the random foster kid Phil Watson had was none other than Tommy Innit. And that the random rich guy that had taken Tommy in was Tempest himself.

Tubbo had all the fucking puzzle pieces but he was doing three other puzzles at the same time and hadn't realized there was a fourth in play. It was a fucking nightmare, to say the least.

Of course, Tubbo had only found that out yesterday, so he was still grappling with how to broach the subject while still protecting Tommy's identities.

On one hand, it was *so fucking important* that they found Tommy before Schlatt could, but on the other hand, he wasn't sure how to *explain* that without putting Tommy at more risk. There was a cost-benefit analysis that needed to be run on the situation but Tubbo really didn't know where to draw the line.

At what point was keeping Tommy away from Schlatt more important than what little trust the other boy had left in him? When did Tubbo have to let the heroes in on at least one of Tommy's secrets just to save his life?

Eret, of course, was unaware of the full situation as he was only an ally of the rogues and vigilantes, not a member. As it was, most of the rogues weren't even up to date on the Tommy-related parts of their growing problems.

His main hope at the moment was that those who did know could track down Tommy within the next few days. If not then he'd have to make more drastic moves.

Tubbo could only assume that the gentle movement of Eret's head was an eye roll before they spoke. "If I didn't know any better, I'd think you had some information gathering power with how quickly you stick your nose in these things."

Tubbo snorted. "I *wish* I had that kind of power, it would make my job infinitely easier."

"Nobody would be safe," Eret joked, joining him in the kitchen.

Tubbo scoffed but couldn't hide his grin. "I would argue that *everybody* would be safe."

"What? Under your worldwide communist dictatorship?"

He barked out a startled laugh, and grinned at them. "Yes, exactly. I'm so glad you understand."

"Well of course, you *are* my favourite cousin after all," Eret replied with a soft smile that made something in Tubbo's chest flutter oddly.

The cousin thing was the excuse they had come up with for Eret suddenly acquiring a teenager that he now arranged his work schedule to accommodate. But for some reason the more comfortable Tubbo seemed to get, the more often they brought it up.

Something must have shown on his face as Eret's lips twitched. "Something wrong?"

Tubbo blinked and shook his head. "No, it's just— I don't know. Guess I'm just thinking about where I'll be when this is all over." If he was even still alive to see the end. Though as far as outcomes went, that was still one of the better ones. No more Tubbo was better than somebody else getting a hold of his powers.

Oddly, Eret just smiled again. “Well, I think we’re getting close to a solution on that front but I wouldn’t worry too much about it. If nothing else you’ll always be welcome here.”

Tubbo tried his best to mask his surprise as he met their eyes. “What—”

Gunfire echoed off the high rises and office buildings, making Eret whirl towards the sound’s origin. Tubbo frowned, quickly following them to the large wall of windows in the living room.

On the street below the police were running around in a fashion that spoke of panic and disorganization. Tubbo watched curiously, squinting closer when he realized the Tempest Agency heroes were nowhere to be found.

“I could have sworn Tempest had a whole patrol team down there,” Eret muttered without looking away from the chaos below.

“They can’t have gone very far—”

The armoured police transport *exploded*, peeling open like the shell of a grenade in slow-motion as green vines covered every visible inch of the road, growing rapidly to engulf the surrounding buildings in tangling mats of plants and leaves.

Tubbo watched in fascination and concern as the vines continued to weave into each other and reach, up and up and up, until they were curling over the windows of Eret’s penthouse apartment. Up close he watched as the vines wrapped themselves into thicker cords before melting into each other and creating bigger and bigger vines that snaked out to the edges of the building and presumably around it as the structure began to groan under their new weight.

“What the *fuck*, ” Eret gasped, stepping back from the window. Muffled echoes of gunfire and shouting seeped into the room from the street below.

“Trigger,” Tubbo frowned, ignoring the sick twist in his stomach. “Usually when I enhance a person’s powers for the first time I give them a significantly smaller boost, but Trigger takes them from zero to one hundred in a little over a minute. The effects of a fully enhanced power without proper control can be absolutely devastating.”

In a roundabout way, Tubbo couldn’t help but feel responsible for every bit of destruction and death that had been wrought under the influence of Trigger. Without Tubbo, without his complacency and cowardice, there would be no Trigger. He would always be at fault for it on some level.

He couldn’t help the part of him that thought every death from here on out may as well have been by his own hands.

“If it’s the synthetic he’ll burn out in a few minutes though, right?” Eret asked, already stalking back towards the bedroom, presumably to grab their hero gear.

“Yes, but if it’s pure, there’s no telling how long it could last,” Tubbo replied, making his way back into his own room just as the building-wide fire alarm started up.

He resisted the urge to sigh, slipping a pair of headphones over his ears to muffle the sound as he went about collecting his irreplaceable belongings. After stuffing all his hard drives, laptop and memory sticks into his school bag Tubbo hesitated before retrieving his Haywire jacket and mask from the duffel bag under his bed. The mask was stuffed in the bag along with some extra hacking devices while he shrugged the jacket over what pieces of his school uniform he had yet to remove.

After another moment of deliberation, he discreetly slipped the handgun that was tucked into the bottom of the duffel into the backpack as well.

One could never be too safe when half the criminals in the city were on the lookout for them.

Eret probably wouldn't let him get anywhere near the fight, but Tubbo refused to go unprepared. He had seen what could happen with a fully enhanced power from an underprepared subject. Haywire might need to make an appearance to give the heroes a final push.

Up on his bed, Eret's cat Goose meowed rather unhappily at the fire alarm interrupting her nap.

Despite his concerns, Tubbo laughed at the cat as he tied his combat boots. Slinging the bag over his shoulder he scooped her up with one arm, making his way back out into the living room. A moment later Eret appeared in full Guardian regalia, a strange-looking backpack in hand.

Eret gestured for the cat, which Tubbo relinquished easily. A moment later he laughed again at the sight of the cat in the bag, her little face sitting in the hard plastic bubble window with wide curious eyes.

Tubbo accepted the cat-pack, replacing the school bag on his back with it and slinging the second backpack over one shoulder before following the hero out of the apartment.

It seemed like his conversation with Ranboo would have to wait just a little bit longer.

Phil didn't even realize Vex-Wing had joined the battle until he got a faceful of colourful parrot feathers that sent both avians spiralling towards the ground.

"Grian!" he yelped, the other's real name accidentally slipping past his filter in his surprise.

"Sorry!" he called back, managing to smack Phil with his wings one more time before they both pulled out of the freefall and went back to dodging the forest of whipping vines.

"Who taught you geezers how ta fly!" Venus teased as she shot by in a flurry of long hair and white feathers, laughter easing some of the tension in the air.

Vex gasped in mock hurt, shooting Tempest an accusatory look as they weaved through the ever-changing plant-based obstacle course. "I'm not sure if I'm more hurt that you got the avian intern on your first day back or that she just called me old!"

Phil laughed, adrenaline rush making him admittedly somewhat giddy to be back in the field again. “Hate to break it to you mate but I’m pretty sure you were retired until last week, that practically makes you ancient in this industry!”

“Now that’s just ru—” he was abruptly cut off when Venus slammed into him with a pained shout, sending them both crashing into the growing jungle of vines.

Tempest cursed, trying to slow down and circle back towards them when a red vine the size of a telephone pole came out of nowhere, smacking him down and into more waiting vines. He managed to twist and avoid the worst of the hits, using his powers to pick up the wind under his wings and gain control back faster.

“You bird brains better get out of there before those things get any bigger,” Poodwattle warned over the comms. *“Not really in the mood for scraping the only avian pro-heroes off the cement in an hour.”*

“Is being rude part of the job description at the Tempest Agency?” Vex-Wing chimed in, now flying far enough ahead that Tempest couldn’t quite hear him without the comms. *“Because I swear that every single time I team up with you guys it just gets worse.”*

Phil couldn’t help but laugh, internally relieved to see his intern gliding to safety just behind the parrot avian. “What can I say, I like kids with spunk,” he joked.

“Spunk and bad manners aren’t the same thing, Tempy.”

He laughed again, now close enough to see the mild annoyance on Grian’s face as the man landed and turned to watch him.

“And you wonder why Venus called you a geezer,” he grinned, landing next to the shorter man and immediately ducking away from a smack with a multicoloured wing.

“I resent that statement.”

“Resent it all you want, I think we’ve got bigger problems right now,” Cyberonix practically growled, stepping away from the slowly reforming police barricade behind them. “I saw you use your powers on the green vines but not the red ones, right?”

The teasing atmosphere faded as Vex-Wing’s expression hardened into something a bit more serious. “Yes, I tried to manipulate the red vines as well but it felt like my powers just slipped off. It wouldn’t be that weird considering I’m better with inorganic matter, but I don’t understand what’s different about the two types.”

Tempest studied his intern curiously as the boy frowned at the unfolding scene before them. The explosive growth of the vines seemed to have slowed down, mostly contained within the two blocks nearest the original fight next to the bank. However, it seemed that every minute that passed came with more of the red vines, creeping up through the existing layers of green and spreading like blood in water.

“The red ones reek of demonic magic,” Cyber snarled. “If I had to guess I’d say that they’re coming from underground and his powers are giving them their own Trigger boost.”

“The red ones are faster,” Poodwattle added, crossing his arms. “You guys were all doing a fine job at dodging until they got big enough to start taking swings. Every time one of you got hit down it was a red vine.”

Tempest frowned, watching as the red vines slowly encroached on the scene, wrapping around the larger green vines and weaving together until they were buried under the crimson.

“You can sense demonic magic?” He asked, turning back to Cyberonix. It wasn’t unheard of, though magic was fairly weak in the modern world and was mostly confined to government-sanctioned nether portals and heavily regulated enchanting and alchemy. With magic so uncommon, most hybrids had lost their genetic connections to the stuff.

Cyber offered him an annoyed glare. “Obviously,” he said, offering no further explanation.

Poodwattle and Vex-Wing snorted at the same time while Tempest resisted the urge to sigh. It would be nice to have a little more than the general definition of *demonic magic* but the intern was obviously more than a little defensive about it.

“Thank you, Cyber, very helpful,” Pood said, tone dripping with sarcasm.

“I’ll rip your heart out with my bare hands Pood, don’t test me,” the teen grunted in reply, though he looked no more angry than usual.

“Cyber,” Aegis warned, lightly swatting the back of the other’s head, “stop threatening our supervisors.”

This time Phil did sigh, earning him a knowing look from Grian.

“Kids with *spunk* huh?” he said quietly as the interns started to bicker about the validity of threatening someone just for being annoying.

“Oh shut it,” he grumbled, taking a few steps back from the group to get a running start back into the air.

So far it seemed that Vex-Wing and Poodwattle’s powers had been ineffective against the red vines, so it was worth testing if Tempest’s would have any effect.

Both Vex-Wing’s transmutation and Poodwattle’s artistic-creation powers were heavily energy reliant when compared to Tempest’s own. Hopefully, his weather manipulation would be more effective as it was based on guiding natural occurrences.

With every beat of his wings, the wind picked up, answering to Tempest’s beck and call. Phil grit his teeth at the burn in his back and wings, it had been a long time since he had done so much high-stress flying, much less while using his powers. But he wasn’t about to take a sideline because of it, the sooner this was over the sooner he could focus on getting Tommy back.

As he reached the top of the tallest high rise on the block he decided enough power had been built up and tucked his wings in to dive back towards the writhing mass of plants.

The air rushed around him, screaming in his ears and pushing against his face but he ignored it all, focusing on his target. He slipped through the top of the weaving canopy with ease, timing it just right so that once he was within twenty feet of the ground, his wings snapped open, releasing the pent-up winds in the sharp motion of his feathers slicing through the air.

The effect was immediate and devastating as the air quite literally *cut* through everything in its path, slicing clean through the trunks of freakishly large vines and cracking some of the nearby buildings, concrete and glass alike.

Well, it didn't manage to cut through *quite* everything. The hero cursed as the remaining red vines reacted with a new speed, lasing out to hit him down while others attempted to wrap around anything they could.

The short blade strapped across his back was immediately retrieved, dark netherite gleaming with enchantments that seemed to have no problem slicing through the crimson vines that attacked his legs. The plants practically exploded as they were met with the magic, releasing dark splashes of thick liquid that smelled strongly of *rot*.

Tempest nearly gagged as it splashed against him, immediately staining his gear with its putrid scent. However, he did not slow down as he fought through the plants to climb back above the buildings and out of their reach.

As he broke through the canopy once more the sound of shouting reached his ears and his head whipped down immediately searching for the source.

Two figures were just visible at the edge of the overgrown area, one's red cape and gold crown flashing in the sunlight as they hacked at the encroaching vines with a dark blade of their own.

He saw a flash of colourful feathers as Vex-Wing took off, heading right for the second, smaller figure making a break towards the heroes and police line.

What Guardian was doing here, Tempest had no idea, but he obviously couldn't leave the other hero to fend for themselves when thus far *nobody* had been able to challenge the Trigger-powered demonic plants.

He once again gathered the winds around him as he dove for Eret, using the air to cushion his descent and take off faster as the vines grew rapidly and chased after them.

"Thanks!" Guardian called over the rushing air around them. "My powers were only working on the green vines, but not the red for some reason!"

"Nobody's are!" He replied in kind as they reached the end of the next block where the vines had yet to venture. "One of my interns says it's demonic magic! The only thing working so far is my sword!"

“Mine too!” they said as Tempest slowed their descent, carefully giving Vex-Wing and the boy he rescued enough room to land ahead of them.

The second their feet touched the ground the boy was sprinting towards the two of them. “Guardian this is really *really bad* —”

“I know Tubbo,” Guardian replied, meeting the teen halfway with a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“No Guardian those things—”

“I *know* Tubbo, don’t worry about it. I’m up to speed on this, I promise.” The two shared a look that Phil didn’t quite understand before the boy — Tubbo — relaxed with a sigh.

“This is *really bad*,” he repeated again, though more to himself than anyone else as his gaze locked on the vines that were slowly starting to crawl and twist in their direction.

Phil frowned at the boy's expression, if he didn’t know any better he’d think that the emotion was something akin to *guilt*.

“Mind sharing with the class Guardian?” Vex-Wing said as they turned to join the other heroes. “I can’t say anybody else here is up to speed on this.”

Guardian sighed, blank white eyes turning back towards the vines again. “It’s a case that The Captain and The Warden just briefed me on. They’ve decided on calling them *bloodvines*. Apparently, there’s been reports of these things growing all over the place underneath the city. It started with sightings by underground heroes and urban explorers but, as of this week, they’ve started to pop up in even the busiest subway stations.”

“Know any way to stop them?” Tempest asked with a frown. If these had been spreading under the city this whole time, he didn’t want to know what the place would look like in a few months when they decided the underground wasn’t enough. Especially if they were able to grow anywhere near their current size without Trigger.

“Aside from what we just learned about enchanted weapons doing damage but not powers? No. There were quite a few people well versed in magic and such working on this for a while, but nobody had the answers.”

The atmosphere was tense as they all watched the vines warily. By now there were practically no green plants left in sight, now completely drowned out by the crimson that began spreading more onto previously clear blocks.

“Great, so what I’m hearing is we’re screwed,” Venus muttered, wings curling tight against her back as her feathers ruffled slightly.

Phil felt his own feathers ruffling instinctually. He didn’t blame her for being so nervous, but it definitely wasn’t helping that his own bird brain wanted him to protect and comfort the girl. A glance at Grian confirmed the man seemed to be having the same problem.

Stupid lonely bird brains. There was a reason the two avian pros had always been fast friends in the field.

He told his instincts to piss off and focus on the task at hand.

“Since the villain's not dead yet he must have taken the pure Trigger agent,” Guardian said. “From what I understand the longest that can last is *maybe* two hours, so at the very least the vines will stop physically attacking then.”

“But what kind of damage do they do when they’re *not* Trigger powered? Demonic magic is no joke,” Aegis said, stepping forward with a frown as the vines slowly crept down the untouched parts of the block they were on. He frowned. “I’m raising a shield, there’s no way it doesn’t reach us in the next two minutes.”

“Probably not the worst idea,” the strange teen muttered from behind them.

Phil frowned when he saw that the boy had parked himself on the road behind them, sitting with a far-off look in his eyes as he stared at the overgrown apartment complex down the road. There was still something...off about him.

“Tubbo, right?” He asked, taking a step in the boy’s direction. His green eyes flicked up to meet the heroes with a small nod. “Why don’t you go wait by the police barricade, you’ll be safer back there.”

Tubbo looked like he was about to argue until a disgruntled meow came from one of the bags on his back and he sighed, head hanging in defeat.

“Yeah Toby, somebody’s gotta take care of their cat,” Cyberonix teased, barbed tail flicking in delight.

“Piss off Eryn,” the brunette grumbled, pushing to his feet. “Next time you ask for help with physics homework I’m setting it on fire.”

Cyber scoffed. “Right, and next time you ask Aimsey to teach you how to cover up your fucked up face — *ow!*”

Venus glared unapologetically, having just hit him in the eye with a Sharpie she produced from somewhere. “Leave ‘im be Eryn,” she ordered.

Immediately the interns returned to bickering while all the heroes eyed Tubbo curiously. Phil wasn’t entirely sure what “covering up a fucked up face” entailed but it didn’t bring anything nice to mind.

Predictably, the teen looked extremely uncomfortable under the scrutiny and gave them all wary looks before settling on Guardian. “Let me know if you need me,” he said before shuffling off toward the remainder of the police barricade.

Around them a golden glow began to solidify in a dome, stretching from just behind the barricade to just in front of the heroes where Aegis had his back turned to them, arms raised as he strengthened the shield with his powers.

Aegis , the shield of Zeus, wielded by his daughter Athena. A heavy title to bear but one that Freddie seemed perfectly capable of as the gold dome solidified like glowing glass just as the first of the vines reached them.

The small roots touched the edge of the shield and recoiled immediately, smoking dark and putrid where they brushed against the gold light. *Aegis*'s arms lowered as he stepped back, turning to face them with glowing gold eyes and an annoyed look on his face.

"You two realize my power requires *concentration* , right?"

Cyber and Venus immediately cut their argument short, both looking more disgruntled than apologetic. "Sorry," they both managed in gruff tones.

Phil sighed, trying to ignore his creeping dread at the vines around them grew thicker, tiny weeds twisting on each other into stocks, stocks into vines, and vines into larger, gnarled monstrosities that were quickly starting to cover every inch of the road, consuming the shining cars parked along the curb and climbing up every lamp post and visible wall.

He frowned, noting how even the biggest vines kept a few inches of distance between *Aegis*'s shield and themselves.

"Your shields are magic," Guardian said before anyone else could voice the thought. There would be no other discernible reason for them to burn upon contact with the glowing dome.

Aegis frowned at them, taking a step back towards the other interns as if solidifying their trio as a separate group from the four heroes. Tempest, with morbid curiosity, noted the odd look the two boys shared. They were definitely hiding something.

"I'd appreciate it if that fact never left this group," the intern said after a moment.

Tempest couldn't help but snort, at least he was being upfront about it. The direct stubbornness reminded him painfully of Tommy, how he sometimes refused to answer a question but wouldn't go so far as to lie.

"You three are definitely on the right track to make great pro-level heroes someday," Tempest said with a rueful smile, shaking his head. "Having and keeping secrets is more than half the job."

He shared a knowing look with both Vex and Guardian, making the pros chuckle.

"As it stands, you two are also probably a bit more qualified in this department," Guardian said to the interns, "so if you have any suggestions for a plan, we'd love to hear them."

Aegis and Cyberonix shared another look that now reminded Phil of Whisper and The Blade on the rare occasions they worked together in the field. Communicating an entire conversation through only looks, a synergy built on growing up side by side through thick and thin. After a moment they looked back at Venus, who startled a bit at the attention.

The three interns fell into a hushed argument and Tempest took a few steps away, respecting their secrets for now. There were more pressing matters at the moment.

“If all else fails,” Vex muttered after Poodwattle excused himself to go check in with the remaining police force, “I bet a *hurricane* could put a dent in these bloodvines.”

Phil tensed, feathers ruffling a bit at the suggestion. “Grian...” he started uneasily.

The shorter man offered him a strained smile. “I know, I know, but as a last resort. Sh— that magic could be just enough to do some damage if it comes down to the wire.”

“It hasn’t even been half an hour and it’s already covered five blocks,” Guardian pointed out with a sympathetic look on their face. “At this rate, the entire district could be red if the Trigger lasts the full two hours. It might be our only chance.”

Phil took a steadying breath, wishing that the shaking in it was so audible. Luckily the interns were still absorbed in their own planning, so only Eret and Grian were there to see it.

They were right, of course. If whatever his interns managed to scrape together wasn’t enough, it would fall on Tempest’s shoulders to see it through. But still...

That had been the reason he finally retired. It was too much of a burden when he didn’t have to bear it anymore, when he had the option to step back, to move on and be happy like he promised he would. He wasn’t alone anymore.

Except now Tommy was gone. He couldn’t let this go because his youngest could very possibly still be within the danger zone of this incident if they let it run its course.

“Only as a last resort,” he relented. “Even if I’m getting a hand it still takes a lot out of me to use so much power. *Especially* since I haven’t tried it in a couple years.”

The other pros nodded, expressions stony. It wasn’t a light decision to make either way. A hurricane slamming the city without warning had taken its toll a number of times in both Black-Wing and Tempest’s careers. Grian and Eret had been around long enough as both vigilantes and heroes to see it themselves.

“We have an idea,” Cyberonix called out, drawing their attention. “But I don’t think you’re going to like it.”

“What’ve we got,” Vex-Wing said brightly, clapping his hand together as they all rejoined in a larger group.

Venus sighed, wings sagging slightly as she scratched the back of her head. “Well, the plan’s actually got nothing to do with magic ‘cause there’s pretty much jack-shite they can do, but *I* might have something we can use.”

“*Language*, fledgling,” Vex-Wing immediately scolded, looking a little more than annoyed.

“I am *not* a fledgling!” the girl protested immediately with a sour look. “But sorry,” she added in a begrudging tone, immediately disproving her own point. Just because a young avian had all their feathers didn’t make them fully mature.

“Get on with it,” Cyber snarled, though he seemed to be focusing his ire on the ever thickening blanket of plants outside the golden shield.

Venus grumbled something under her breath before squaring her shoulders, chin raised a bit higher. “My powers paralyze anyone that can hear me when I sing, it stops them from movin’ or thinkin’, which in most cases cuts off a person’s ability ta’ use their powers. The problem with this plan is that I can’t control who’s affected, so if any of you were within hearing range, I’d take you out too.”

Phil flexed his wings slightly, hoping to ease the tension in his aching back muscles. He wasn’t sure how he felt about where this was going.

“So you’re suggesting you go out of here, alone, to try and get close to the same villain that kicked you through a *window* earlier, and take him out yourself,” Tempest said slowly, the plan sounding even worse out loud than it did in concept.

“No, I’m suggesting you all cause a distraction so I can get in close to him an’ take him out by myself,” she clarified like that changed much. “The window thing wasn’t my best moment, I’ll admit. But I can handle myself, I’ve been through worse with a lot less to work with.”

There was something about her expression that stopped him from immediately shooting the idea down. Some strong-headed determination and understated confidence that seemed out of place in a second-year intern.

Quick glances at Vex-Wing and Guardian confirm that he isn’t alone in the feeling.

This group of interns was certainly an enigma, but it wasn’t like it was the first group of strange kids he had to work with in the field. It was just weird to see the same experience on new faces.

“You’re *sure* about this?” he asked, searching her face for any sign of hesitation, any weakness that could cost her if she slipped up.

She offered him a brazen grin, though her eyes remained cold as steel. “*Ab-so-lutely*,” she drew out the syllables of the word as emphasis. “Besides, s’not like we’ve got many more options.”

Tempest frowned. They had exactly one more option, one that wouldn’t involve putting a partially trained intern in the direct line of fire.

He felt guilty that the larger part of him was searching for a million reasons to justify going with her plan. That he couldn’t bring himself to put his foot down and finish it himself.

He looked back to Grian one more time, taking in the man’s ruffled feathers as his wing’s pressed against his back. The parrot-avian offers him a soft grin that doesn’t quite erase the discomfort in the lines of his form. “Up to you number one, they’re not my interns.”

Phil heaves a sigh, steeling himself. “Fine, but if we’re doing this you have to do this *exactly* as I say. I’m not kidding when I say that messing around right now could easily get any one of us killed, do you all understand?”

He waits until all three interns nod, Cyber having to tear his gaze away from the bloodvines with a dark look.

They could make this work, hopefully they wouldn’t need Tempest’s trump card to finish it.

Chapter End Notes

Part two will come tomorrow morning!

But if you're reading this and see the next chapter button then go go go go!

Also, I'm thinking about making a discord server, thoughts? would anybody be interested in that?

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Haywire lends a hand.

The fight against the bloodvines takes a turn.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is *part two* of the *double update*! If you haven't read chapter 21 yet then press that previous chapter button!

This is probably the shortest chapter to date but I hope it doesn't disappoint! My wonderful beta was losing her shit at the end of this so I hope you guys do too :)

Thanks for all the wonderful comments, now on to part two!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Tubbo! ” Guardian’s voice rang out across the stretch of empty cement between the small group of heroes and the shabby police barricade.

Tubbo tore his eyes away from where Poodwattle was helping the only remaining paramedic stabilize the injured police officers and straggling civilians that had been caught in the initial attack.

He looked over to find the three pros and their trio of interns gearing up, Eryn and Beau once again bickering as the demon hybrid begrudgingly forced bright orange plugs into his ears.

A once-over confirmed that Tempest, Vex-Wing and Guardian all had ear plugs of their own, most likely given by Venus who kept a ready supply of them in her utility belt.

Tubbo would know, he was the one who suggested it.

“You should get out of here before the end of the block is overgrown!” Eret said. “They’re evacuating all the buildings to Centennial Park and setting up medical and triage there! Go tell the officers and paramedics about the wounded here!”

Eret was asking for Tubbo’s help. They easily could have just relayed that information by radio but it was a decent enough cover for what he was really asking.

“Kay!” Tubbo called back, pushing to his feet and once again shouldering the cat-pack. Goose let out a disgruntled noise but otherwise stayed calm. Hopefully, she wouldn’t mind a bit of jogging.

“Hey Tubbo!” Eryn called as he turned to leave. “Stay safe out there!”

Tubbo glanced over his shoulder, meeting the demon-hybrid's red eyes. Eryn’s gaze narrowed slightly and Tubbo resisted the urge to sigh. As many stupid tiffs he and the other teen got into over the last two years of school together, they held a mutual respect for each other.

Of course Eryn could tell something was up, he was always more observant and intelligent than his rocky exterior would suggest. Out of all the hero students Tubbo regularly hung out with, Aimsey was the only one he feared more. He was fairly sure they both had him figured out but kept silent, for whatever reasons.

“You too!” he replied, turning back towards the slowly closing gap in the vines at the end of the block.

Goose was predictably unhappy about the sprinting start their journey had.

Tubbo had really pushed it at the last second, the vines making active attempts to lash out at him as he ran past. However he was light on his feet and expecting it, so they made it out of the danger zone in no time at all.

He hadn’t even realized how much the bloodvines were living up to their name until Centennial Park came into view a few blocks later. The air quickly lost the tang of iron that built up as the crimson slowly overtook the Trigger-fueled villains' green plants.

Tubbo didn’t waste a second, immediately scanning the crowds of evacuees for a particular head of green hair.

“Sarah!” he yelped upon spotting Eret’s young neighbour. “Hey I need a quick favour!”

The twelve-year-old looked up from the nest of wires and metal scraps in her hand with a suspicious scowl. “What’s in it for me?”

Tubbo couldn’t help but laugh at her tenacity. At this rate, he had no doubt she would be leading the forefront of heroics support engineering the second she graduated. But for now, all she had was scraps of tech and Tubbo’s own piecemeal advice to get by on.

“Twenty bucks for you to watch my cat,” he said, unslinging the cat-pack for his shoulder.

The creeper-hybrid’s nose scrunched up in clear disgust. “What am I, six? I hate cats, give me something better.”

Tubbo rolled his eyes, setting Goose down next to the girl anyway as he dug into his bag. “Thirty bucks and the blueprints on how to make one of *these*, ” he offered, pulling out a small prototype flash grenade that had been stuffed at the bottom of his school bag for whatever reason.

There was an immediate hungry gleam in her eyes as an almost dark smile played on her lips. “Give me that prototype on top and we have a deal,” she declared, holding her hand out expectantly.

Some part of Tubbo’s brain told him that giving a twelve-year-old girl a small handheld grenade was a bad idea. Then another part called him a hypocrite because he was twelve the first time he started making them.

“Deal, just don’t mess around with this too much, it’s still live,” he said, tossing the device into her palm before digging three tens out of his wallet. She gave the grenade a slightly more cautious look as he handed over the money and slung his school bag over his shoulder. “Thanks Sarah, you’re a life saver!”

“Just don’t skimp out on the blueprints!” she shouted after him as he sprinted back out of the park towards the fight’s epicentre. “I know where you live!”

Tubbo threw a wave over his shoulder, unable to hide the grin on his face. Sarah was an absolute menace and Tubbo loved every second of it, certain that if he grew up under different circumstances they would likely be very much the same.

As he ran Tubbo fished his phone from his pocket. If this whole thing went terribly wrong this could be his last chance to call Ranboo.

“Hello?” the teen answered, sounding confused.

“Hey Ran-man, it’s Tubbo,” he said, trying to keep the strain from running out of his voice. “Sorry about the radio silence, but I have a really quick favour to ask if you’re up for it.”

“Oh! Oh thank prime you’re okay. I can listen for a second but I can’t really talk shop, I’m, uh, preoccupied at the moment,” he replied, tone strained slightly with stress.

“All good I’m kinda in the middle of something too.” He slowed his pace as the vine-covered buildings came into clear view. In the distance, he could see the three avian heroes circling just above the vines’ reach, probably looking for an opening to dive through.

“Okay, shoot, what’s up?”

Tubbo stopped on the abandoned street, the roads having been blocked off and evacuated along with the larger part of the district, if he had to guess. In all honesty, Centennial Park wasn’t nearly far enough away to be safe, but he doubted anyone but himself and the heroes knew that.

He retrieved his mask and grappling line from the bag. After a moment of hesitation, he tucked the handgun into one of his many jacket pockets as well.

“Most of the safehouses in the city were cleared when I dissolved the network, but some of the older ones just outside the city limits weren’t worth the time,” he explained. “Someone opened the one above Gottingen Street using big T’s access code, I need someone to pop in

and check what he took. Depending on what's missing we could get a clue as to what the hell he thinks he's doing."

With the mask strapped securely in place over the lower half of his face, Haywire threw the large hood over his head to obscure his head and face as much as possible. He zipped up the jacket and quickly secured what random tech and weapons he found stuffed into the bag in his pockets.

Tubbo sighed, realizing there would be no way to get a view of the fight without getting near the vines. Hopefully, the villain would be too distracted to notice Tubbo, though it seemed just as likely that the vines had a mind of their own, simply drawing on the man as a power source.

"I—I don't know Tubbo. I mean— crap, how do I explain this..."

Tubbo made his way to the edge of what seemed to be a now abandoned three-story restaurant, slowly getting covered in thin red vines the size of the ivy that clung to its brick exterior. He shot the grappling line up, thankful when it caught the first time.

"You can say no big man," Tubbo found himself saying despite the way it made his stomach flip. "I understand you're retired and all, no hard feelings." He thought Tommy and Ranboo were closer than that, but oh well, it's not like he had really seen enough of them in the last few months to know.

"No, it's...I got a few offers for sponsors. To transfer to Prime Academy. To the hero course, that is."

Tubbo paused, feet planted on the side of the building as he used the line to support his climb up. He almost immediately regretted it as the bloodvines started to grow over his boots and forced himself to keep moving.

"That's fantastic, boss man, congratulations." It wasn't really a surprise that Ranboo wanted to be a hero, Tubbo always knew that's why he and Crumb became vigilantes in the first place. He just wondered what series of events led to those offers.

The other end of the line was quiet as Tubbo finished the climb to the roof. He was a few blocks down from where Freddie was still shielding what remained of the injured cops. He doubted anyone down there would spot him and he still had enough of a vantage point to see where Guardian and Cyberonix were brute-forcing their way through the vines with nothing but their enchanted netherite swords.

Tubbo didn't even hesitate before activating his powers to give them a slight boost. Even if their powers couldn't do much against the vines, Tubbo's enhancements would still offer them an extra physical energy reserve.

Schlatt may have been a horrible father and a rat bastard for what he did to Tubbo growing up, but dammit if it didn't get results. Tubbo sure as fuck knew how to get the most out of his powers.

"You're...not mad?" Ranboo said hesitantly after a minute.

"Of course not, you'll be a great hero Ranboo," he said honestly, eyes shifting up to where the avians were still taking potshots at the larger forest of vines, trying to create an opening for the youngest to dive through. Could he give them a boost without being noticed? "And I understand if you don't want to risk anything, I have some other contacts I can get to check for me, I just figured you'd be the fastest if you were available."

"Oh," Ranboo sounded faintly surprised but Tubbo didn't really have the time to think about it. *"Okay. I'll let you know if I end up finding the time, but yeah, the answer's probably a no. Sorry."*

"Don't worry about it, and seriously congrats man. I gotta run now, see you around hopefully." Tubbo smiled to himself, it would be really nice to just see Ranboo casually again. Maybe if everything worked out they would be going to the same school as early as next term after winter break.

It was a big maybe.

Ranboo laughed weakly. *"Thanks Bo, see you around."*

The line clicked dead and Tubbo pocketed the phone.

"Oh fuck it," he muttered to himself, powers activating and latching on to both Tempest and Vex-Wing.

The results were almost immediate as the next gusting attack was stronger with less effort on Tempest's part. The vines parted at the hit and Venus took the opening, diving through the gap and into the now completely red forest of plants strung across the centre block of the affected zone.

Haywire watched curiously as Cyberonix pushed ahead of Guardian, cleaving through even the thickest vines that challenged him with relative ease.

If he remembered correctly Eryn's powers weren't dissimilar to The Blade's, only the half-demon's powers ran on fear. The more fear Eryn could absorb from those around him, the stronger, faster and harder he became.

It was only when Cyberonix vanished from his line of sight that the vigilante considered cutting the enhancement off. Unfortunately on top of being horrifically powerful and intelligent, Eryn was also a teenage boy with demon blood in his veins, which made for rather poorly managed anger issues in Tubbo's experience.

For all that was happening, it was eerily quiet. Tubbo was too far to hear any of the heroes speaking, if they even were at all. The only sounds that reached his ears were the creaking and groaning of nearby buildings settling with the added weight of the bloodvines. Occasionally the tinkle of shattering glass would join as a car or window was crushed under the slow-moving onslaught of flora.

If it weren't for the scents of blood and rot heavy on his tongue and the never ending sea of red, this could have qualified as one of the most peaceful moments Tubbo had ever witnessed in the city.

Five echoing gunshots gutted the deceptive tranquillity.

Tubbo's heart dropped as he felt Eryn's powers shut off, cutting his own connection to them.

Beau screamed loud enough to be faintly heard even from as far away as the vigilante was.

The faintly present winds *roared* to life.

The force of Tempest's powers knocked Tubbo off his feet and nearly sent him tumbling from the rooftop. The vigilante scrambled desperately for a hold. He caught himself on the crimson plants that had continued to slowly creep up the edges of the roof while he stood by and observed the fight.

He didn't bother trying to stumble back to his feet, knowing the winds were only growing stronger with every second that passed. The vines took advantage of his position, slowly wrapping around his limbs and holding him tight against the flat gravel rooftop.

The air whipping against his face made his eyes water as he looked back up to where Tempest and Vex-Wing had been hovering above the entangled web of red. Only Tempest remained, climbing higher and higher into the air as clouds gathered in the previously sunny skies.

Tubbo remembered the last hurricane Tempest caused all too well. It had been the final lesson he needed to solidify a habit of planning escape routes from run-down buildings.

Sometimes Tubbo's treacherous mind still reminded him of how tight Schlatt held him when they finally dug him out from under the collapsed warehouse. How much it seemed like the man genuinely cared.

He really, *really* didn't want to be stuck on the top of a building when a full-force *hurricane* hit the city.

As if hearing his thoughts, the vines grew tighter around him, constricting around his ribs and sliding their way under the sleeves of his jacket, burning like acid where they met exposed skin.

Tubbo was *so* screwed.

A cold hand suddenly closed around his shoulder and he flinched, awkwardly twisting to see who had managed to sneak up on him despite the powerful winds. The *last* thing he needed right now was a random hero having followed him from the park, or even worse, one of Schlatt's men.

Green eyes met a pair of lifeless brown and every muscle in his body instinctively froze.

Now, to be fair, Tubbo had always been a trouble magnet, even by the standards of the weird world of heroes and villains. But he never started to attract *divine* trouble until he met *Tommy*.

Drista was the first fully divine being Tubbo could remember meeting, a goddess trapped in the body of a teenage girl who somehow decided bullying Tommy was a worthwhile pass time. The second he saw her face, white mask pushed aside to reveal unnatural green eyes, every nerve in his body lit up screaming *danger*. An instinctive habit that continued any time he felt her gaze land on him no matter how long he knew her.

Not even a week after Drista, he met Foolish for the first time when the rogue demigod returned an unconscious Theseus to their hideout after finding him passed out in an alley. Tommy just seemed to collect gods like Pokémon cards for no explicable reason.

Yet somehow, despite having heard stories of or personally encountering almost every divine creature that frequented the city, Tubbo had never heard anything about a dark-haired woman with soft, lifeless features. But he had enough experience to know what she was, as if the eerie stillness of her hair in the building storm wasn't enough of a clue to start with.

She offered him a lopsided smile, soft and incredibly kind but so wrong with the seeming lack of life in her face. "You're looking a bit stuck there kiddo, need a hand?"

Tubbo stared at her dumbly for a few more seconds before the burning vines around his arm shifted, reminding him of his predicament.

He grimaced. "Are you going to hand me a zombie hand if I say yes?"

Was pissing off an unidentified goddess a good idea? No. Did Tubbo get weird when he was tired and nervous? Yeah, but he couldn't really help it.

Luckily she laughed, the sound somehow reminded him of wind chimes on a summer day despite the circumstances. "No, but I do have a small favour to ask of you. I think it might be in everyone's best interest if you could help me out."

The vines around his torso tightened painfully as thunder rumbled overhead. "Yep," Tubbo hissed out painfully, "sure, sounds great, whatever. Please don't let the demon plant eat me."

She laughed again. "Wasn't planning on it," she replied, waving her hand over him with a gentle wash of magic that prickled against his skin.

The effect was seemingly harmless to him, but every vine within a three foot radius began to wither away, crumbling to dust in the wake of the strange magic.

He clung to her arms as she pulled him to his feet, the wind immediately ripping the hood from his hair and trying to throw him off his feet again. The goddess snapped her fingers and just as suddenly as the storm tried to take him the winds around them died, leaving the air eerily still where they stood at the edge of the roof.

"I'd like to ask if you could enhance his powers," she said, eyes turned up towards the clouds with a small frown on her face. "I can't offer him much help here, the crimson is too

powerful. But you should be able to make the difference.” Soft brown eyes turned back on him, unnatural in the way they seemed to absorb light instead of reflecting it.

Tubbo stared at her for a long moment, his mind scrambling to understand who she was or what she had to gain here.

Much like Drista, she didn’t dress like the ideal of a goddess. She was wearing black cargo pants and a thick black turtleneck sweater, a light kevlar vest covering her torso and thick plastic bracers over her forearms. Her hard plastic knee pads were just as scuffed up as her worn combat boots.

It was jarring when he realized why it looked so familiar. She dressed like a vigilante, her gear not so far off from what Amnesia wore on an average night. An outfit pieced together from random, practical items and nothing like a hero’s polished costume and armour.

It was so achingly human when everything else about her screamed otherwise.

“Well?” the goddess asked when Tubbo failed to do anything but gawk at her.

“What— who *are* you?” he blurted before he could think about it. “How— what the *fuck* is *my* life?” he lamented, mostly to himself as he turned to look up into the darkening clouds.

Lightning flashed again, illuminating the dark silhouette of Tempest against the gathering ceiling of grey above them. Tubbo reached out with his powers once more, latching onto the hero’s own and cranking the level up to a hundred and ten with a flick of his wrist.

Lightning crackled and thunder boomed, the heavens opening up and pouring down a flood like the city had never seen.

Tubbo was soaked in seconds, hair plastered to his head as he turned back to the strange goddess beside him. She had her eyes closed, face tipped up as if to feel the rain that didn’t even dampen her hair.

She smiled as she spoke. “I’m Death,” she answered belatedly, voice somehow impossibly soft yet loud, even over the raging storm.

Rain turned to sleet and sleet turned to ice, hail beating down in great sheets that stung Tubbo’s hands as he tugged the hood back over his head.

A headache started to build behind his eyes as he focused on the golden dome through the volley of ice and latched onto Aegis’s powers, buffing them as well.

Ice softened out to snow as the temperature continued to drop, lightning striking nearly every second as the whole world became a cacophony of thunder and wind. Within seconds nothing was visible under the heavy snowstorm, the whole world lit up under the white and bright flashes in the sky, yet completely obscured beyond three feet ahead.

“Tubbo, when it comes down to it in the grand scheme of things, a god is nothing,” Schlatt said, gently tugging his fingers through Tubbo’s hair where the boy’s head rested against his shoulder. “A god is nothing,” he repeated, “compared to the man who can create them.

You're that man Tubbo, the one who makes gods." The child looked up through his shaggy hair with a frown, not understanding what the man was trying to convey. *"That's why we're doing this, all this training is for you to be the greatest. To create gods."*

Tubbo never really believed he was creating gods with his powers, but some part of him couldn't help but remember the speech as the pro-hero vanished into the frozen tempest.

"Am I about to die?" he asked Death, shivering as a cold gust made it through their little bubble of safety, blowing right through him.

Death turned to him with a soft smile. "I'd sure hope not," she said kindly, "it would certainly be a bad time for it."

He stared at her for a long moment, his mind fracturing as it focused on keeping up his hold on both Tempest and Aegis's powers while also trying to glean the meanings of mortality from a simple non-answer.

"You don't know when a person's time is?" he asked, confused by the lack of a direct answer.

She grinned almost mischievously. "You only get one life and it's yours to live and die, not mine. However you spend your time is yours and yours alone, my job is simply here to guide you home when your time is up."

Tubbo's breath crystallized in the air as he sighed shakily, turning to watch the endless white storm that covered the plague of red that had overgrown the blocks around them. He couldn't think about this right now, otherwise, his mind might actually break and he'd lose his hold on Tempest.

"Okay," he said, like he was accepting the statement as fact, "okay," he repeated quieter, like it was something to come to terms with.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Death smile. When not looking at her dead-on she seemed more human, almost looking like a woman not much older than twenty.

Without warning the world of ice, lightning and thunder ended in a searing *blaze*.

It was as though all the electricity breathing life into the storm was dragged from the heavens to the earth, converging on a single point made of golden hair and shining black feathers. Between one breath and the next, every single red vine lit up with hundreds of millions of volts of electricity, coursing through every inch of the infestation as the discharged lightning arched off of Tempest in a thousand directions.

Tubbo squeezed his eyes shut, trying not to think too hard about how close he was to it, how if it weren't for the literal goddess of death standing next to him he would be just as charred as every giant red trunk to each tiny weed that grew from the cracks in the sidewalk.

Despite all his years as an inventor and bootleg engineer, hacking up wires and power sources to pieces before breathing new life into them, it never occurred to Tubbo just how *loud* pure electricity could be.

Between the unending roar of thunder and the impossible display of sheer, raw *power*; his ears were left ringing so bad he didn't even realize it was over until the rain returned with a vengeance, forcing the teen to stumble back as the wind whipped at him once more, soaking his frozen clothes in seconds.

He released his powers, ignoring the way every heartbeat sent a spike of pain through his head and the taste of iron in his mouth that came from the thick blood gathering on his upper lip and trickling down the back of his throat.

He turned away from the smoke and ash-covered scene below, eyes dancing with spots from the brightness of the pure electricity even though his closed eyelids.

He expected to find himself alone on the roof once more as the hairs on the back of his neck no longer stood up in the way they did when a divine being was nearby. Only to his unpleasant surprise, he met a familiar pair of bright purple eyes across the way.

Minx offered him a lazy grin, twirling the spear in her hand like it was nothing more than a shiny toy to show off.

The gun was out of his pocket and in his hand before he even really understood what was happening.

"Just make this easier on all of us an' come quietly!" Minx jeered as she took a few slow steps forward, the spear stalling in a way that screamed *danger*. "We both know you don't have the guts to use that thing properly anyway."

Despite how disoriented he still felt, Tubbo couldn't help but be a little affronted at the implication.

Maybe it was the after-effects of using his powers that made his tongue so loose and his decision so quick.

Maybe it was the fact that he just looked death in the face, and she looked like him. A dead vigilante walking.

"I've killed before, Minx," he reminded her, firearm steadying in his grip as he narrowed his gaze on her. "I am *not* going back with you."

"Your time is yours and yours alone."

Rain dripped from his eyelashes in blurry splotches as he levelled his aim and pulled the trigger, the sound of the shot swallowed by the roaring thunder overhead.

Phil's knees buckled under him the second the villain's eyes rolled back, falling unconscious from Tempest cutting off his oxygen supply.

Every muscle in his body ached with a vengeance, burning in protest against even breathing as his wings fell slack behind him.

Never in his life had he wielded so much power, even with her help. He didn't even know it was possible for a single mortal to do such a thing, yet he could still feel the lightning in his veins and the sparks on the tips of his feathers.

He nearly sobbed when a pale hand rested atop his own where it curled into the burnt remains of the bloodvines, soaking into the cracked pavement below.

This was the part of this power he wanted to avoid, that he couldn't handle. He refused to even attempt to lift his head, but the sight of the gold band around her finger alone was enough to make his eyes burn.

"I know you asked me to stop visiting," she whispered in his ear, breath hauntingly absent where it had once been warm, "but that, my angel, was the second most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

He bit the inside of his cheek hard enough to taste iron, squeezing his eyes shut as someone distantly called his name over the continued rumbling of thunder. He couldn't stop shaking as the rain soaked him even further.

Soon enough a heavy wing draped itself across his back as Grian arrived at his side, speaking to him even as the words slipped his mind like water through open fingers.

When he opened his eyes again, Kristin was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Guys, when I say that everything you've seen so far is from the world view of the characters and the current events they were going through, I mean that there is *so much more* to this world than meets the eye :3

Seriously you have no idea how exciting it was to finally get to this point, I've had like two completely different Kristin intro's that got scrapped and this one is *so much better*.

Also, I'll say it again for the people that blasted past part one, anyone interested in a discord server? Just trying to gauge interest at this point.

Leave a kudos and comment if you've made it this far, I really want to know how you guys are feeling about this turn of events!

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Ranboo takes a risk.

Tommy searches for answers.

Chapter Notes

Hey-o, at it again with the angst train!

Also I just can't get over the amount of love this fic is getting! I'm sorry I'm so bad at responding to comments but I do read and appreciate every single one! Thank's for all the love and special thanks to my wonderful Beta <3

Reminder of Crumb's vigilante name change to Amnesia!

CW: self-destructive behaviour and mild torture if you squint

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ranboo managed to hold out for a couple of hours after Tubbo called, which was kind of impressive, all things considered.

It had been pretty darn hard to miss the way that the weather had taken a sudden turn, turning sunny skies into a lightning-filled snowstorm in minutes. Ranboo didn't have to be a genius to guess how it happened once Niki rushed into the living room beside him and turned on the news.

Tempest was back and somehow stronger than ever, taking out a Trigger powered villain that threatened to collapse a number of major highrises downtown.

Tubbo wasn't answering his texts or calls, every message left unread and every call ringing through to voicemail.

Unless Tempest had somehow gotten ahold of the pure Trigger himself, Tubbo *must* have been the cause of his sudden power spike. There were plenty of unanswered questions there but the most pressing one in Ranboo's mind was *where's Tubbo?*

Tubbo had been on radio silence for both Tommy and Ranboo since the final network meeting and while Ranboo was happy to hear from him, it felt like a bad omen. Tommy

running away would have been enough trouble on its own, but Ranboo had been listening.

Despite what he told Tubbo, he couldn't *quite* just sit back and hope the heroes would solve all their problems. He hadn't gone as far as actually donning his own mask again, not now that Niki knew about his sleepwalking and made a point to keep a closer eye on him, but the heroes were careless about what they talked about in front of him. He knew more than enough to decode their vague statements and figure out the latest news as it came by him.

From the sound of it, things were getting tense. The investigation into the bloodvines became an ongoing argument behind closed doors while concern grew over the stalling Trigger case.

Whatever plans they had before were completely thrown off by Wilbur's car accident and the leave he'd have to take because of it. Things seemed to be going downhill on almost every front. Then Tommy vanished and threw everyone into a new level of chaos.

All the pro-level heroes from the Tempest agency promptly lost it and dragged anyone still standing into the whole mess. The worst part was that they had no *idea* how bad it was that Tommy was gone, what was really at risk if someone unfriendly managed to get their hands on him.

So when Tubbo called asking for his help, he knew it must be desperate. He made it sound like Ranboo was the last resort, and everyone else being unavailable could only mean bad news. But with Niki hovering around him like he was about to vanish next, how could he get away without risking everything?

As it turned out, Tempest's storm and the following damage and flooding were his escape.

Niki stared down at her phone with a pained expression. "They're calling me in for flood rescue," she sighed, turning to Ranboo with a look of concern. "Are you going to be alright on your own?"

Ranboo glanced outside where the rain was still coming down in sheets and nodded. "As long as the roof holds up enough to keep me dry," he joked. "You should go, they need your help more than I do."

Niki smiled weakly and suddenly there were arms around him as she rested her head on his shoulder. Ranboo forced himself to relax and hesitantly return the hug.

It's just Niki, he chided in his own mind.

She's Nix, another part argued. *Her powers could kill you.*

"You're a good kid, Ranboo," she said into his chest. "Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

He smiled weakly, ignoring the way the water burn scars on his back tingled under her touch. The same kind of burns she could cause with a careless move.

Would she still say that if she knew who he was?

“I’ll try not to,” he said instead, gently pushing her away by her shoulders. “Now go do your hero stuff, I can hold down the fort here.”

She grinned at him as she turned toward the apartment's front door. “Just try to stay dry, I’d rather avoid any more hospital visits any time soon.”

Ranboo snorted. “You and me both, don’t let yourself freeze,” he warned, turning back toward the couch as she said her goodbyes, the deadbolt sliding shut behind her.

Ranboo immediately sagged, collapsing on the couch and staring out the windows with unfocused eyes.

If Ranboo was doing this bad after finding out about Niki's identity, Tommy was going to have an aneurysm when he found out about Techno. Nix and Endwalker had very carefully never crossed paths, The Blade and Theseus had been at odds for years.

Heck, maybe that’s why Tommy ran, but he sincerely hoped not. He liked to think that he and Tommy had grown close enough that the younger boy would have at least offered him a warning before vanishing.

Except here Ranboo was, lying on the couch doing nothing while he knew what he could do to help find Tommy. He had automatically turned down the opportunity to help with a lame excuse and without a second thought.

Maybe... *maybe* he had the time to go check the safehouse. Blade and Whisper were still barred from field work and Tempest would no doubt be exhausted after causing a whole *hurricane*, so who else was left to look for clues to Tommy’s whereabouts?

That was how he found himself here, in a rundown apartment building on the outskirts of the city, digging through the dusty storage crates scattered around the bedroom floor to try and discern what had been taken.

He kept the hood of his raincoat up to avoid the water dripping at random from the leaking roof and onto him. Every once in a while a lucky drop would find its way to his exposed hands, making him wince. Not for the first time he silently resented his ender heritage, it was impossible to exist in this realm without encountering water every so often.

The large black storage bins had already been opened and rifled through, as well as most of the cabinets in the kitchen and the wall safe in the bathroom.

Tommy had cleared out what he needed and made no effort to hide it. However, what caught Ranboo’s eye was that most of Theseus’s body armour was missing while his hoodie, mask and iconic staff remained untouched in their box.

Upon further inspection of the other open boxes, he discovered that one of Spade’s helmets, a majority of Haywire and Amnesia’s weapons kits, and one of Endwalker’s heavy jackets were all missing as well.

Tommy needed gear for something, but he was leaving Theseus behind. That could mean a lot of things, but Ranboo really hoped it just meant he didn't want the attention that came with the dead persona.

The sound of the creaky old front door shoving open had him freezing in place. Who could possibly be here in a storm like this? It was the middle of the day—

“We can just hole up in here until it dies down enough for the trains to start running again,” a high-pitched, slightly warped voice said. Ranboo silently moved his back against the wall. “I'm surprised this is still here, I would've thought for sure Haywire cleared it out.”

“Did he clear out other places like this?” A man replied, followed by the heavy sound of combat boots across the worn floorboards. “It looks like it was partially cleared recently,” he said after a beat. “There's literally handprints in the dust here.”

Lighter steps follow and Ranboo swallows. He got what he came here for, didn't he? He knew what Tommy was doing here so he should just get out before he was discovered. Yet something stopped him.

The voices sounded like a *very* familiar duo he knew. But he couldn't fathom *why* they'd be together in broad daylight when one was a hero and the other a vigilante.

“Hm, weird,” the smaller voice said, the sound metallic through what Ranboo now recognized as a voice changer. “Check the bedroom, I think that's where most of the important gear is stored here. If there's a ton of that stuff missing I might have to get in contact with someone to warn them about missing tech.”

“Fair enough,” the man said, heavy footsteps already crossing the room towards Ranboo's not-so-hiding spot.

He should *really* leave, or at the very least grab one of the masks out of the many open bins to hide his face. But he's also just *so confused* because—

Captain Sparklez stepped through the doorway, sunglasses pushed up into his soaking wet hair to reveal his wide-eyed look of surprise as he immediately spotted Ranboo half-crouched in the corner of the room.

Sparklez blinked hard like he wasn't sure what he was seeing and Ranboo couldn't help but grimace. Well, now he *has* to know.

“Calico?” the hero called into the other room, eyes never leaving Ranboo's face as he did so.

Ranboo stayed shock still, Sparklez's body language hadn't shifted to anything dangerous yet, but he wasn't about to risk it. If this turned into a fight he'd end up at a severe disadvantage when they ended up blowing a hole in the side of the building and taking it out into the rain.

“Yep?” the high voice answered, sounding somewhat distracted.

“You know any ender-hybrid kids who might have a reason to hang around here? Or am I just looking at a squatter?”

“*What?*” the other voice— *Calico* , apparently— yelped, quickly followed by the sound of light steps sprinting towards them.

Just as Ranboo had thought, the figure that rounded the corner was in fact, Crumb, the second half of the infamous hero-vigilante duo. Except now she wasn’t wearing any of Amnesia’s vigilante gear.

Instead, Crumb was decked out in professional-make hero gear, loose white jumpsuit glinting with the telltale netherite weave and light armour pieces in orange and dark brown to match her visible cat ears and tail. Instead of Amnesia’s porcelain-style mask, she wore a heavy mouthguard that covered the lower half of her face and flickered with LED lights in the shape of a cartoon cat mouth, open in shock.

“End— *what the heck?* What are you doing here?” she questioned, the mouth on her mask moving in time with her words.

He stared at her in utter confusion for a moment, trying and failing to come up with a meaningful response. “You’re— *since when are you a hero intern?!*” he cried, absolutely thrown by the turn of events.

“I— well hey! Didn’t you *retire?* ” she threw back.

“I did! I’m just—” he sighed, some of the tension draining as he stood up again. “I’m just looking for Tommy, I wasn’t expecting anyone else to show up here,” he grumbled, shooting Sparklez a wary look.

The hero frowned at him, now looking just as confused as the two teens. “Tommy?” he asked, eyebrows drawing together. “You’re not looking for Tempest’s missing kid, are you?”

Ranboo grimaced, glancing back at Crumb who gave him a wide-eyed look. Crap.

Sparklez, of course, picks up on their reactions to the question immediately. “Wait a second, why would you be at an old vigilante hideout looking for Temp...oh. Oh *crap* ,” His eyes widened with the realization as Ranboo and Crumb sighed in unison. Double crap. “Does anybody know?”

Man , of all the ways Ranboo could’ve accidentally let Tommy’s identity slip, he hadn’t really imagined a situation quite this wacky. But he also did stuff like sleepwalk and get kidnapped by demon plants, so it somehow seemed on par for his current position in life.

Ranboo’s mouth opened and closed a few times as he tried his best to formulate an answer. Luckily he was momentarily saved by the phone in his pocket vibrating with a text.

He shot the hero a nervous smile instead of answering and retrieved the device, praying it wasn’t Niki home early to an empty house.

He blinked when he found it was a reply from Tubbo and stared at the information with growing dread.

It was a location ping from the other teen's phone and nothing else. When he tried to ask for clarification, the text immediately flashed with a red *not delivered* warning.

"Oh gods," he breathed, nearly dropping the phone as he brazenly pushed past Captain Sparklez and Crumb towards the open bins of vigilante gear, immediately digging for what was left of Endwalker's things.

"Ender?" Amnesia— or *Calico* now— questioned cautiously. "What's wrong?"

He swallowed nervously as he quickly shrugged off his jacket and loud Hawaiian shirt, moving to strap the heavy kevlar vest over his t-shirt. "I just got a distress signal from Haywire and my reply messages didn't go through."

Neither of the heroes spoke for a moment, leaving Ranboo to strap his arm guards and knee pads on in silence. This wasn't the safest way to dress, the short sleeves would offer little protection for the rest of his arms and the jeans would be harder to manoeuvre in, but it was better than just pyjamas.

"Do you think the heroes caught him?" Calico asked as he slipped the raincoat back over the vest and bracers. Tommy had taken his heavy Endwalker jacket and he didn't have time to test if any of the rest of the gear would protect him well enough from the rain.

"I don't know," he admitted, trying to ignore the way his heart raced in his throat. "It could be anything, but I think whatever it was he drew some attention with that huge stunt with Tempest."

Captain Sparklez shared a look with his intern that almost made Ranboo smile as he slipped his Endwalker mask over his face. It was funny, how relationships formed between vigilantes and the heroes supposedly hunting them. Sparklez and Crumb had been a team for years and could come to an agreement without speaking a single word.

"Take us with you," Sparklez said, extending a hand, palm facing up. "If it's heroes we'll try to run interference and if it's villains, we'll have your back."

Ranboo hesitated for a moment too long, earning a small huff from Crumb.

"We don't leave friends behind, dummy. Let's go get Haywire so we have even more people to look for Tommy, yeah?"

Ranboo couldn't help but smile at her conviction. He could never understand how Crumb just *did* that. How she just stuck to her morals so optimistically, dragging everybody else along with the energy of it.

Honestly, despite the situation, he couldn't help but be a little excited by the realization they could be classmates next year. It was gonna be absolute chaos.

But they had already wasted enough time, so Ranboo didn't let himself think about it any longer. "Thank you," he said, hoping his gratitude could be heard through the overwhelming storm of thoughts he was trying to ignore.

He took Sparklez's hand and waited for Crumb to grab onto her mentor before activating his powers, sending the three halfway across the city in a flash of purple particles.

Pain laced through his knuckles and up his arm as the nose beneath his fist gave with a sickening crunch. Tommy waited for the man to stop screaming curses at him before repeating the question he'd been asking for days.

"The mercenary's name, that's all I want," he demanded, the voice changer in his borrowed helmet making his voice metallic and scratchy.

Unlike the three other men Tommy had just beat within an inch of consciousness, this one laughed in his face.

"You're running on fumes rogue," he mocked, grinning so wide it showed off the fresh blood staining his teeth and mixing with the rainwater pouring down his face. "You really think you can keep doing this for long? That Hellcat's mercenary and Schlatt haven't caught wind of your stunts? Whoever you think you are— *gaaahh!*"

His brave rant turned into a panicked sound of fear as he was suddenly manhandled until Tommy was holding the man's arm at an angle just shy of dislocating something in a very painful manner.

Tommy knew that there was a point in his life where the idea of hurting someone more than necessary was something he balked at. He remembered when HBomb first taught him this move, how he argued that he'd never need to hurt someone that bad.

He was beyond caring now, too exhausted and angry to scrounge up any empathy he might have once had for men like this.

Dislocating this guy's arm wouldn't even be the worst injury he'd given someone tonight.

Tommy was tired of being selfless, tired of trying to worry about everyone all the time. He was allowing himself to be selfish now, to put the people he cared about first, to do what he had to in order to keep *them* safe and alive. He didn't give a shit about anything but that, not even what happened to him if things went south.

"Last chance," he growled, putting a little more pressure on the joint and making the man whimper.

"I— *fuck* — I wish I could watch Hellcat turn you into a fucking shish-kebab like tha—" he was cut off by his own scream of pain as Tommy wrenched his arm up with a wet *pop* of the ligaments in his shoulder tearing away from their correct alignment.

The man collapsed against the alley wall with vile curses spilling past his lips and Tommy turned to leave without looking back.

No matter how many of Hellcat or Schlatt's men he tracked down, no matter how many he beat to a pulp asking the same questions over and over, there were no answers. The mercenary had said he was the guy they called to make people disappear but apparently the dickhead was a ghost himself.

The mercenary had given him until Thanksgiving before he started attacking again, eleven days from the Sunday they had that conversation. He had six days left and nothing to show for it.

Police sirens approached in the distance as he ducked into the broken side door of a rundown apartment complex. He scanned the area for signs of life before slinging the empty duffel bag off his back, careful not to drop it in any of the puddles from the hurricane.

The soaked helmet was the first thing to come off and, for a moment, he found himself just staring at his own reflection.

Tommy had been through a lot in his life, yet despite it all, he never got used to the feeling of looking at a stranger in the mirror. It seemed to happen more and more often as he got older, he'd catch his own reflection and wonder what changed, where the soft baby fat of his face went, where the lean muscles and pink scars came from, when the dark bags under his eyes became a permanent fixture.

It happened once at Phil's house, but it was different that time. He looked in the mirror and was met with someone who looked healthy and content. He hadn't looked overly happy, per se, but the lack of what he thought would be permanent torment in his own eyes had caught him off guard.

This felt like the opposite of that. Tommy had seen many depraved things looking back in his reflection, but never something so desperate and *angry*. His face was hardened by exhaustion and determination, his bright eyes fueled by raging *fury*.

It wasn't the fake anger he summoned to cover his fear, he'd lost that some time between leaving the hospital and attacking the first group of Hellcat's men he tracked down. He wasn't scared of what happened next, no matter what happened he was the loser in the situation. He just wanted to make sure that the right people got dragged down with him.

Something in him snapped after seeing Beau and Eryn earlier that day. He had more friends than the people on that list, friends who could be in danger the longer he let this drag out.

Something had to give.

The sirens grew closer and he felt bile burning the back of his throat. Some small rational part of his mind took over long enough to remind him that he should hate the man looking back at him, he should be protecting people, not torturing them for information.

He stuffed the helmet in the bag, quickly scrambling to unzip his oversized jacket to take off the kevlar vest hidden underneath.

None of the gear he wore was visibly Theseus's, that persona was long gone and didn't need to be resurrected as a violent rogue. The red and black gear could rest where it was kept in a police evidence locker alongside the misidentified bones they'd scrounged up from the bay. It was almost ironic how fitting that ending was for someone named Theseus, not even a proper grave to call his own.

The dark helmet was from one of Spade's unmarked gear sets and the large purple and black jacket was an extra one of Endwalker's. Both had been retrieved from a safe house on the outskirts of the city that hadn't been cleared out when Haywire dissolved the network.

Along with the borrowed gear, Tommy had also cleared it of its first aid kit, easily transportable food and emergency cash reserves.

As much as he felt he was pulling this whole stunt to be selfish, it wasn't really, because he wasn't doing this for his own gain. Even if he took care of the mercenary, Tommy would be on the run for the rest of his life and he refused to drag the people he cared for into it anymore.

The rest of his new gear was stuffed into the bag and slung back over his shoulder as he made his way out through a different door, red and blue lights flashing in the distance.

It was laughably easy to vanish into the city at night.

Despite how many police and heroes he knew were out looking for him, all it took to dodge them was a medical facemask and a black hood pulled up to hide his hair. Nobody questioned it when he ducked out of the neverending rain and into the nearest subway station.

Nobody found it odd as he waited for the next train either, dripping slightly while the other occupants of the platform stood dry in their bright dresses and dark coats, umbrellas tucked under their arms. Three callgirls didn't spare him a second glance as the train arrived and they got into the empty car two up from the one Tommy boarded.

The drunk man passed out at the back, slumped over with his face hidden where it pressed into the seats, had no problem with Tommy and his heavy duffel bag dropping down at the front of the car.

The three teens at the next stop, decked out in soaked hoodies holding skateboards, paid him no mind as they made their way towards the back. They giggled to each other as they moved to rifle through the unconscious man's pockets.

The other occupants of the train car didn't even notice a sixth figure appearing when the lights flickered in the tunnel for a moment.

Tommy blinked in surprise as Drista stepped out of thin air and dropped onto the seat across from him, but he didn't tense in the way most people would.

Tubbo and Ranboo had commiserated about it once, how unnerving it was to even be in the same room as the young goddess, but Tommy hadn't really understood it. Sure, he could sense her without looking, he could tell she was different, more powerful. But it wasn't *scary*, it just *was*.

Either way, the skater kids were having too much fun going through the unconscious man's wallet to pay Drista or Tommy any mind. The city just kept on moving, as always.

"You look like shit," she said after a long moment, eyes looking him over with thinly veiled concern.

It was an odd expression on her face, most people would never get to see her without the green hoodie and mask, and even then she tended to only remove it when she was in a good mood.

Tonight the mask was nowhere to be seen and her usual neon hoodie had been replaced with a faded orange one sporting the firebrand logo. Tommy was fairly certain he'd seen Karl Jacobs wear the same hoodie once, but he wasn't sure if it was a coincidence or not.

"You're the second woman to say that to me this week," he grunted, tipping his head back against the window behind him.

She snorted and shook her head. "You're an idiot."

"Thanks," he sighed, closing his eyes again. "Who finally worked up the nerve to send you?"

The train was painfully silent for a beat, save for the quiet rocking of the car and a wheezing cough from the drunk at the back.

He cracked his eyes open again and squinted in her direction, trying to gauge her reaction. He opened them a little wider when he found her openly frowning in his direction, expression caught somewhere between annoyance and...hurt?

"What? I'm not allowed to visit you when I'm bored? We're not on hanging out terms anymore?" she said eventually, something biting in her tone.

He grimaced, realizing how rude that was. He hadn't seen Drista in, what? Four months? And he didn't even say hi?

"Sorry, I'm just being a dick cause my back hurts," he grumbled, glancing up to see which stop is next. He still had a few more to go. "And because my life is falling apart," he added almost as an afterthought.

Surprisingly, something about that made the younger girl visibly relax and she settled further into her seat, legs stretching out into the empty aisle between them. "Fair enough," she sighed. "Your life *is* pretty depressing. Not that you really seem to be trying though, running away without telling anyone isn't really the best way to improve your situation."

Tommy closed his eyes, ignoring the fresh wave of guilt and pain that made his stomach churn. If only it were that simple.

“I’m not trying to improve my situation, I’m trying to make sure nobody else gets dragged down because of me,” he replied, praying that his voice didn’t shake too badly. “I just want to keep them safe.”

The train's brakes squealed loudly as it began to slow down at the next train platform.

His attention was drawn back to the teens as they got up, shoving at each other and bickering as they gathered their things.

“Just leave it,” the tallest one hissed, tossing the sleeping man's wallet back in his general direction. “We can’t do anything with a broken ass phone anyway, we took his cash so let's just go.”

One of the shorter kids looked like he was going to argue before the other snatched the phone from his hand and tossed it on the seat next to the slumped figure. The tallest sighed as they all made their way off the train and onto the platform just as the doors shut behind them.

The man groaned quietly and shifted, but made no other indications that he was even alive.

He could feel Drista’s gaze burning into the side of his head the whole time, never bothering to so much as glance at the other teens.

She waited to speak until he turned back and met her gaze once more. “You don’t want to drag everyone down, or you want to keep them safe? Which one?”

He blinked at her. “What?”

“Those aren’t the same thing,” she said firmly. “Your absence alone is dragging *everyone* that cares about you to their lowest, it’s hurting them every second they don’t know where you are. As a consequence they’re all doing stuff that’s going to put them in danger, so what exactly are you keeping them safe from?”

He let out a startled laugh, though there was no humour in the sound.

“What am I keeping them *safe* from?” he asked incredulously. “Whatever they’re doing to put themselves in danger is *nothing* compared to the danger of having me around. My bro—Wilbur was supposed to *die* just because I care about him. I’m *protecting* them from fucking *death*, from the consequences of my fucking *existence*.”

She stared at him with an unreadable expression, her green eyes nearly glowing in the low light.

Tommy swallowed around the painful tightness in his throat and shoved his hands in his jacket pockets to hide the way they were starting to shake. He was so fucking tired of feeling like he was one outburst away from a full-on breakdown. His chest hadn’t truly stopped hurting since Ms. Thomas came to drive him to the hospital.

He— they’d be *fine* without him. Every single one of the people on that hit-list was fine before they met Tommy and would be fine without him, end of story.

“You’re my only friend, Tommy,” Drista said eventually, face twisting with a kind of sadness he’d never seen her express before. “Any other friends I used to have can’t even look at me anymore without wanting to run away screaming in terror. You’re the only one that’s not afraid of me.”

Tommy opened his mouth to argue before thinking better of it. Even if that wasn’t true, that wasn’t his point to argue. But when he thought about it for a moment, it *was* true. Everyone except Foolish and Karl always looked so damn *nervous* any time Drista was in the room, they always kept her in their line of sight and immediately relaxed the second she vanished.

It wasn’t always that way, when Foolish first introduced Drista to them a couple of years ago nobody seemed to have a problem with her. But as the months passed and her powers grew, as she became noticeably more *other*, everyone started to pull back. Eventually, she stopped hanging around the vigilantes and rogues altogether, only catching Tommy on the rare occasion he was patrolling alone and she wasn’t busy.

“When you die,” she continued after a moment, startling Tommy from his thoughts, “that’s it. The day *you* die is the day my last tie to mortal life is severed, because I’m never going to have a friend like you again.”

Tommy could practically feel his heart beating out of his chest. “Drista—”

“The way you’re going,” she cut in, tone harsher than before, “isn’t going to end well for anyone. And honestly, I couldn’t care less about what anybody else feels about this dumbass stunt you’re pulling, but *I’m* not ready for you to die. So this is a warning, as *your friend*, that if you keep trying to be a lone *idiot*, you’re going to die, or find yourself caught up in something *worse*. ”

Her eyes were fully glowing now, the words sitting heavy in the air between them. Tommy let out a shaky sigh, breaking eye contact to stare at the stupid graffiti on the small section of wall behind her. One large scribble looked like a giant moth with horns carrying away two stick figures.

“I’m not sure there’s a lot of things worse than death, Dris,” he muttered, chewing at the skin of his lips enough to sting the older scabs there.

“You have no *idea* what you’re up against, Tommy,” she said, leaning forward so her elbows rested on her knees. Her dirty blond hair fell disturbingly perfect over her shoulders, outside of her the usual ponytail that kept it in place.

“Tubbo told us about Schlatt, I know what’s at risk,” he argued, finally meeting her gaze again.

“No, you don’t,” she said, expression pinched with that odd sadness again.

He stared at her for a moment, something uncomfortable curling in his gut. “Well that’s not fucking ominous, what the hell does that mean?”

She rolled her eyes like it was stupid that he even asked and shook her head. “If you just looked around you for five seconds, you’d realize I’m not the only one that’s worried about you. Just because you’re not there isn’t going to stop people from caring about you, so just—get some fucking help dude. You don’t have to do this alone.”

Tommy really wished he could believe that, but the thought would probably refuse to leave until he considered it longer. Drista was never one to hand out such serious advice without cause.

“We should start hanging out again,” he said instead, trying to deflect the conversation. “You know, since you have no friends and all.”

Her icy expression cracked a little bit as the train's brakes squealed again and the lights of the next stop came into view.

“That would be nice,” she said, standing as the car rattled to a stop. “I miss that boba place downtown, we’ll have to find a new hangout spot since it closed.”

He smiled weakly, remembering many a night sat on the roof of the twenty-four-hour boba tea house. “I hear there’s a pizza place opening there next month,” he offered as the doors slid open.

She tugged the orange hood over her head, somehow not moving a single hair out of place. Her smile was barely noticeable, but there nonetheless. “Guess we’ll have to check it out if you’re still alive,” she said, dampening the mood a bit more. “I don’t know many ghosts that can really eat pizza.”

Tommy bit his lip again, unable to muster a witty response as she stepped out onto the platform. The doors slid shut behind her and when Tommy blinked, she was gone.

He sighed, slumping back against the seats as he scrubbed a hand over his burning eyes.

At least he’d still have one friend if he died, though he had the feeling Drista would make the beginning of his afterlife absolute hell as punishment for dying when she told him not to.

Tommy didn’t really want to die though, he was just preparing for the possibility.

Right?

A pained groan from the drunk man at the back of the car was a welcome distraction as the train rattled back into motion. Tommy had already let the poor guy get robbed by skater kids, the least he could do was try and get the guy home.

He sighed, standing and slinging his duffel back over his shoulder before making his way towards the back.

Scooping up the wallet off the floor, Tommy’s nose wrinkled at the overpowering smell of vodka and bile. After a moment's hesitation, he opened the wallet to search for an ID. Hopefully, if he just called the guy's name and nudged him a bit he could wake him up

enough to move. Plus it'd be easier to get an address from the ID than from the half-conscious drunk dude.

After a few seconds of digging, he found the driver's licence and found himself frozen, staring uncomprehendingly down at the name and face that stared back at him.

Wilbur Soot-Watson

He looked up slowly as the slumped figure grunted again and shifted, his face now at a visible angle to Tommy for the first time. Wilbur's face was pale and visibly clammy under the harsh train car lights. His eyebrows pinched as his face scrunched up in pain, making Tommy's heart drop.

It felt like a twisted imitation of when he first spotted Wilbur across the hospital room, pale and unmoving. He shouldn't even *be* out of the hospital yet. Prime, had they even had enough time to heal all his injuries fully before discharging him?

The wallet and ID fell from his grip and the duffel bag slid off his shoulder as he surged toward his brother, the awful smell suddenly the least of his worries.

"*Wilbur,*" Tommy gasped, falling to his knees in front of where Wilbur slumped sideways across two seats, his long legs sprawled limp over the edge and across the floor. He put his hand on Wilbur's face, gently running his thumbs under the man's red-rimmed eyes, his own bruised hands shaking slightly. "Wil?" he nearly whispered, only earning a fluttering of eyelashes in response.

What the *fuck*. Why— Wilbur didn't even really *drink* to Tommy's knowledge. He had watched the man turn down a glass of wine multiple nights when Niki and Ranboo were over for dinner. What could have possibly— *why*? Why would he do this?

"M'sorry dad," Wilbur slurred, his eyes not even opening when Tommy's hands flinched in surprise. "I— I *know* — m'so so'ry..."

And gods if Tommy thought his heart was racing and his chest hurt *before*, he may as well have been having a fucking heart attack now. He *hated* this, he hated it so much more than seeing Wilbur in a hospital bed because at least in the hospital he knew Wilbur was going to be *okay* —

"S'my fault," he slurred again, leaning his face into Tommy's hands. "He said he wasn't o— *okay* and I should'a *said something* —" Tommy bit his lip when he felt warm tears staining his thumbs under Wilbur's closed eyes. "N' now Toms is *gone* —"

Tommy fully froze at the sound of the nickname while Wilbur whined pathetically, turning his face back into the seats.

"M'sorry 'm so stupid...know I shouldn' drink 'lone..."

Tommy managed a shaking breath. Why did everything just keep getting *worse* no matter what he did? Fucking— he didn't even know why Wilbur was blaming himself but this

wasn't what Tommy *wanted* .

"S'okay, Wil," he said a little more confidently than he currently felt. "Why don't we worry about just getting you home right now, huh?" He shifted one hand up into Wilbur's greasy hair and gently ran his finger through it, grimacing as he accidentally tugged at knots.

"Why don't we go back to your apartment?" he suggested, looking around for the fallen wallet and ID. "Probably a bit closer to here, yeah?"

Wilbur grunted wordlessly and Tommy sighed, not looking forward to dragging the man through the dark and rain in the middle of the night.

He could practically feel Drista's gaze on him despite the fact that she was no longer physically present. What a cryptic brat, "*if you'd just look around for five seconds*" , she could have just *said* Wilbur was back there the whole time.

"*Fuckin' hell*," he grumbled under his breath as he retrieved the ID and squinted at the address. Running through his mental map of the city he was pretty sure it would be two more stops, but he didn't want to risk turning on his phone to check.

He glanced at Wilbur's phone on the seat next to his head, lying screen down to perfectly reveal the mini-polaroid photo tucked into the clear phone case. Tommy felt his eyes finally start to burn when he recognized it.

Techno had been helping him with another English assignment in the kitchen a couple weeks ago when Wilbur jumped between them with the camera pointed their way. Both Tommy and Techno had complained and demanded to see the photo but Wilbur mysteriously vanished when Tommy tried to give chase. A few days later it showed up on the back of the phone, but Tommy somehow never had enough luck to steal the phone long enough to snatch the photo.

It had obviously been waterlogged, the whole photo faded and wrinkled despite being dry now. It was a miracle they had even managed to recover it from the car accident in the first place.

"Tommy?" Wilbur's weak voice interrupted, making him jump again.

Tommy managed a weak smile that didn't quite reach his watering eyes. "Yeah big man, it's me. We're just gonna get you home now, okay? You look like you could use a nap."

Wilbur's half-lidded eyes blinked slowly as he struggled to focus on Tommy. After a beat, he hummed in weak agreement and started to push himself upright on shaking arms. Tommy slowly leaned in to assist him, manoeuvring them both until the elder had his head resting on Tommy's shoulder, most of his weight pressed against Tommy's side.

"Are we— dead?" Wilbur asked after a long minute of silence that Tommy feared was him falling asleep again.

The teen tensed slightly before shifting to take Wilbur's hand in his own, relishing the warmth against his aching knuckles. "No, we're just going home Wil. You're gonna be okay,

promise.”

“Are you?” he muttered into Tommy’s shoulder, making him blink in confusion.

“What?”

Wilbur took a moment before speaking again. “Are— are you gonna be okay?” he asked in a painfully small voice like he was uncertain if he could ask, even while inebriated.

Tommy bit his lip hard enough to break one of the scabs and taste iron in his mouth. Why was the world so goddamn *unfair*?

“You’re gonna be okay, Wil,” he repeated, hoping the other was still blackout drunk enough to forget the question. “You’re all gonna be fine, I promise.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh? How did Wilbur get there?! Find out eventually!

The next few chapters and the scenes in them aren't going to be quite linear, so there will be a little bit of jumping around the week between Tommy running away and Tempest's un-retirement fight. Hopefully, it will be straightforward enough to understand though.

Also, the discord server is in the works and will be open by the next chapter! Pretty much just trying to get a mod team together at this point.

Also, you might have noticed the tag changes, but if you remember *all* the way back at the *first* chapter when 30 people *died*, or when Techno killed a fuck ton of people in the nether, it's kind of just par for the setting.

Anyway if you've made it this far leave a kudos and comment, I love to hear people's theories or just screaming into the void <3

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Tubbo calls for help.

Techno adjusts to his new situation.

Chapter Notes

Welcome back to everyone's very bad, no good week. I'm apologizing in advance for this chapter with some [art of Tommy on the run from the last chapter](#).

This is by far the heaviest chapter, make sure to mind the darker tags as well as the content warning on this chapter.

If you're not comfortable with the super heavy stuff then stop reading at "Then a number of things happened at once." and continue from "Shouts of protest rang out...". I'll leave a summary of that section in the end notes.

I'm sorry and enjoy <3

CW/TW: Graphic descriptions of violence, Graphic description of injury and death, Character Death, Suicide Attempt

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

To say that Tubbo's rooftop battle against Minx went poorly was an understatement. But it had been foolish to expect much else considering she was one of the most powerful villains in the city and Tubbo started out with twelve bullets and a raging headache.

"Who did you send the fuckin' location to *brat!*" Minx repeated, backhanding Tubbo across the face without enough force to rattle his teeth and re-split his lip.

He resolutely said nothing, glaring down at her combat boots while the arms around him tightened in their effort to keep him upright. Without the guard holding him up, he would have collapsed a while ago. The last of the fight in his body had been used up in his last-ditch effort to get back his phone and send Ranboo the distress signal.

Of course, they had smashed the phone to pieces about two seconds after the message went through, so he had no idea if anyone was coming. However, that wasn't necessarily the point of sending the signal.

Ranboo was cautious, he kept his ear to the ground and watched situations unfold in a way Tubbo never really could. Tubbo was all numbers and probability while Ranboo was intuition and quick thinking. As long as he knew something happened to Tubbo, Ranboo would figure it out and get the right people onboard to fix it.

Yet, as always, Ranboo surprised him.

The distant sounds of shouting and gunshots from outside were followed by the radio on Minx's belt crackling to life.

"Hellcat! It's Captain Sparklez and some sidekick! They're —" the radio beeped quietly as the connection ended.

Tubbo tensed slightly but didn't look up. *Heroes?*

Sharp nails dug into his face as Minx forced his head up, her purple eyes burning into his with a blazing fury. "You called in the fucking *heroes?*" she hissed, face contorting in a full mask of rage as her eyes started to glow.

Tubbo had not, in fact, called in the heroes. But he definitely wasn't about to tell her that. It was somehow both an open secret and a little known fact that Captain Sparklez had no problem working with vigilantes. Hopefully he could play that in their favour.

"If they're sending in Sparklez on the advance team, I'd hate to see who their tank is," he teased, playing up his confidence as much as his battered and exhausted body allowed. "Tick tock, *Hellcat*. You can't keep me here forever."

To his surprise, she didn't rise to the bait. Instead, she seemed to take the anger in stride as she turned to her lieutenant with a steely look.

"How much longer 'till he's here, Emma?"

Emma looked up from the computer balanced on their lap where they sat cross-legged on one of the many storage crates on the warehouse floor. "Ten minutes," she drawled, looking entirely unimpressed. "They could probably make it less if you wanna cause a scene."

Minx turned back to Tubbo with a considering look as something uncomfortable curled in his stomach. He already knew who was coming without them having to say it. Once Schlatt was here, the heroes that came to rescue Tubbo were screwed.

They had less than ten minutes to get out of here and Tubbo could barely hold himself upright anymore.

"Tell 'em to hurry it up," Minx sneered. "I think we need ta start making some serious examples out of anyone trying ta take our golden goose again."

Tubbo's stomach flipped as she grabbed him by the chin again, forcing him to hold eye contact as she lifted her radio. "Everyone be advised, it's shoot ta kill," she ordered, glaring at him as she spoke. "And make it messy, we're sendin' a message with these ones."

The radio crackled with multiple confirmations as Emma lazily directed many of the men in the warehouse to join the growing battle outside.

Tubbo closed his eyes and let his head go slack when Minx dropped her grip on his face. He silently focused on his powers, reaching out for any familiar powers to latch onto.

Outside he could sense both Sparklez and Crumb's powers activated in a larger mass of enemies. Activated powers flared all around the building as he focused, looking for one more person in particular. After a few moments, he located Endwalker as well, power lingering where he had just teleported somewhere above the warehouse.

Good. So long as Minx and Emma stayed in here, Sparklez and Crumb could deal with anything the goons threw at them.

Sometimes it was scary how fast Ranboo could pull a plan together. It was what made him the rescue and getaway man, whereas Tubbo was just the one that kept track of the players on the field.

Either way, Tubbo wasn't about to give up without a fight. He activated his powers, eyes still closed to hide the way they started to glow, and he boosted Endwalker's powers.

"Hey boss—" Emma started, the sound of their boots thumping in his direction cut off by the loud *vwoop* of one Endwalker's teleportation.

Tubbo's eyes flew open just in time to see the purple particles around Captain Sparklez and Crumb— dressed in her new Calico uniform— fading as they jumped into action.

Sparklez immediately zeroed in on Hellcat, throwing a huge beam of golden energy in her direction while Calico sprinted past him to intercept Emma.

Tubbo watched from the corner of his eye as Emma grinned, eyes flashing red as she bared her fangs at Calico.

"Don't let her bite you, Calico!" he shouted while trying his best to struggle out of the strong arms holding him in place. "She'll steal your powers if she drinks your blood!"

The smaller cat hybrid reacted immediately, springing back just in time to dodge as the villain lunged at her, dual-toned hair flying out behind them.

In front of Tubbo, Hellcat had retrieved her spear and was slowly dodging around Sparklez's golden energy blasts, making her way closer. Every attack she didn't quite manage to escape knocked her back a few feet and scorched her heavy clothes and armour, but every hit she took only made her eyes glow brighter afterward.

Tubbo *really* didn't want to be here when she absorbed enough energy to activate her maximum strength. In all honesty, it probably would have been better for them to switch opponents, but there was nothing Tubbo could do about it as the gangster holding him bodily hauled him towards the back room he had originally escaped from.

Another telltale *vwoop* was followed by a surprised shout and a grunt of pain from the man holding onto him. Tubbo drove his elbows back as hard as he could for good measure. The grip around him weakened enough for him to finally break free.

He didn't falter at the sight of Endwalker holding his captor in a headlock, instead immediately diving for the gun at the guard's hip. Every muscle in his body burned in protest and black spots danced in his vision, but he managed to get a hold of the weapon before the man had the chance to.

The guard immediately gave up clawing at the vigilante's arm around his neck in favour of snatching Tubbo's hand as he tried to pull away.

Tubbo grit his teeth, pushing against his exhaustion as he fought to twist his hand towards the ground, finger inching towards the trigger. The grip tightened painfully around his wrist but it was too little too late as Tubbo fired, shooting the man clean through the foot. The guard screamed in pain, releasing Tubbo's hand as Endwalker threw him to the ground.

Behind them, Captain Sparklez cried out as Minx landed a glancing hit with her spear. However, the purple-haired villain was quickly driven back when this time he aimed a shot of far more volatile red energy her way. It made her shout in kind as it burned away her jacket and skin where it brushed her side.

"You good?" Endwalker asked, grabbing both Tubbo's shoulders to draw his attention as he swayed unsteadily.

Tubbo could see the panic in Ranboo's eyes even behind the lenses of his goggles. He nodded feverishly. "I'm alive. We've got less than ten minutes before Schlatt gets here," he warned.

Endwalker nodded stiffly, grabbing an electric baton from his belt and vanishing in a burst of purple to take care of the few remaining guards still inside the warehouse.

Tubbo took a moment to appreciate just how brutal Endwalker's attacks were, seriously injuring or knocking out every enemy with a single blow before moving on to the next. He always knew Ranboo had taken to hand-to-hand combat well, but this was a side of him he wasn't sure anyone in their network had seen before. It was terrifying, but absolutely what they needed at the moment.

Tubbo moved back into the safety of the piles of storage crates, glancing between Emma and Calico's deadly dance and Sparklez and Helicat's brutal trading of blows. The heroes were holding their own for now, but there was a reason Minx and Emma were able to climb to the top of the city's criminal underworld, their group second only to Schlatt's operation.

They really needed to get out of here. *Fast.*

"Give me a hundred percent power boost and I can get us out of here," Endwalker said breathlessly, suddenly appearing at Tubbo's side again. "I can take us back to the safehouse that we—"

To their left Calico let out a pained yowl as Emma finally got a hold on her, dragging the intern in close and latching onto the barely exposed section of her neck between the top of the jumpsuit and the bottom of the faceguard. The power stealing vampire was barely latched on for a second before they were sent reeling back with a pained curse, their own face now dripping blood from the deep cat claw marks across their left eye.

Emma hissed wordlessly as they held the side of their face, the one visible red eye flicking towards Hellcat. "Hey Kitty! Switch dance partners!"

Then a number of things happened at once.

Tubbo panicked, enhancing Endwalker's powers to their fullest potential and making the vigilante nearly double over at the sudden strain.

Emma abandoned their fight with Calico, rushing with an unnatural speed towards Captain Sparklez who turned to meet them with a snarling look of rage.

Calico collapsed to her knees, hand pressed against her throat as red began to stain her suit from the bite mark at the base of her jaw.

Hellcat backed up, her whole body glowing with a fully built charge of absorbed energy from Sparklez attacks, enhancing her strength ten-fold. Instead of rushing over towards Calico, she drew back her spear, shifting her body to take aim towards the small cat-hybrid.

Tubbo's heart shot into his throat as he noticed, lifting the gun still in his hand to level his aim at the villain.

Now utilizing Calico's enhanced sense powers, Emma expertly dodged through the barrage of attacks Sparklez sent her way. They quickly came within range to pounce at the pro-hero, blood-stained fangs bared in a hiss.

Hellcat drew back the spear and let it loose, its enchanted netherite shaft gleaming dangerously in the low lights of the warehouse as it sailed towards its target.

Tubbo pulled the trigger, his aim leveled directly at Minx's head.

Emma jumped, tackling Captain Sparklez to the ground, her fangs digging *deep* into his fully exposed neck.

Purple particles began to gather around the heroes as Endwalker got a hold of his powers, preparing to teleport them remotely.

The warehouse doors burst open, thrown off their hinges by an explosive force as the men from outside poured back into the building.

Then the spear met its mark, flying true with the force of Hellcat's throw.

Crumb *screeched* as the weapon pierced her netherite armour and through her chest, the sheer power behind the throw carrying her like a ragdoll until the spear was stopped by a wall of

storage crates behind her. The intern let out a weak noise that was filtered into static by the voice changer in her mask, her body immediately sagging limp.

Tubbo's shot met its mark, catching Minx in the side of her head and sending a spray of blood and brains out the other side as the rest of her body was carried to the side by the force of it.

Her corpse slid across the smooth warehouse floor for a few feet before coming to an unmoving stop, a smeared trail of red behind it.

Captain Sparklez shouted in rage and agony as Emma bit down harder, blood bubbling up and pouring from their lips. He struggled to get his hands between them and blasted her point-blank with his powers, sending her body flying off of him with a pained shout. Their grip on his neck did not loosen one bit, and she practically tore part of his throat out as she went, leaving the hero curled on the ground, clutching desperately at the wound to try and staunch the bleeding.

The gathering purple particles vanished for a moment when Ranboo cried out in shock, his gaze locked on Crumb's unmoving body where it was pinned up against the splintered storage crates, dark blood rapidly soaking into her white jumpsuit all the way down to the fur of her limp tail.

An inhuman screeching noise bubbled up in the Endwalker's throat at the particles gathered around Crumb and Sparklez once more, whisking them away in a flash of purple.

Tubbo felt paralyzed as he stared at the place where Crumb had just been, the splintered wooden crates stained dark with blood where her body had been pinned. *Too much blood fuck there was no way she —*

"Oi, shit-stain!" a familiar, rough voice shouted over the growing sounds of pounding boots and loading weapons.

Tubbo's heart jumped into his throat as he tore his gaze away to find Schlatt and Quackity looming in the destroyed doorway. Endwalker turned on them with another full-bodied enderman screech, the baton in his hand falling to the ground with a clatter that made Tubbo flinch.

"Endwalker, just get us—" he started, only to be cut off by Schlatt.

"Don't touch my stuff," Schlatt said, snaking a hand into his suit jacket and retrieving a handgun. He leveled his aim in a second, pulling the trigger as the vigilante brazenly tried to rush them.

Tubbo saw the particles gathering around both himself and Ranboo again but the bullet somehow found its mark before the vigilante could get out of the way.

Tubbo watched in horror as his friend's body was knocked back by the force bullet against his chest, throwing him off his feet. The particles gathered around Ranboo again and he vanished in a flash of purple before he even hit the ground.

The particles gathering around Tubbo, however, dissipated completely, leaving him alone in the centre of the warehouse floor.

The perimeter of the room quickly filled in with all of Hellcat's guards along with the reinforcements Schlatt brought.

Every weapon in the room leveled at him as Schlatt started to cackle maniacally, nearly doubling over while everyone else in the room remained silent.

Behind him, Quackity hovered in full hero costume like a silent shadow, not even bothering to conceal the pity in his eyes when Tubbo met his gaze.

Under most circumstances, if Tubbo were so hopelessly outnumbered while awaiting to face Schlatt's ire, he would have given up and laid down to take the beating. But this wasn't most circumstances.

Tubbo had just potentially watched two of his closest friends and one of the only heroes he respected fucking *die* trying to save him. His eyes shifted away from Ace to the remaining living figure still in the middle of the room.

Emma was propped up on her elbows as she clutched at her burnt torso. Their eyes widened as they stared at Minx's bloody corpse a few metres away. They slowly turned to meet Tubbo's gaze, bloody lips pulled back in an acidic snarl.

In a flash she was moving, scrambling to her feet and sprinting at Tubbo, but he knew it was coming from the moment he met her gaze. With a dark glint in his eyes, he lifted the gun again and pulled the trigger without hesitation.

Two shots rang out and the sight of their body crumpling on the floor shouldn't have been as satisfying as it was, but a deeply vengeful part of him sang at it.

The blonde half of her hair soaked up the pooling blood on the floor like a sponge.

Shouts of protest rang out from Hellcat's men at the sight of the second of command falling to Tubbo's hand, but they were stopped from retaliating by a firm order from Schlatt.

"Hold your fire or die," he called out, laughter now absent from his voice. His dark eyes narrowed at Tubbo, who just started back in an uncharacteristic show of defiance.

Tubbo was fucking done with this. He knew it would be ultimately pointless, but by his count he only fired three shots, leaving him with twelve rounds.

Schlatt huffed when Tubbo turned his aim on the man, looking entirely unimpressed. It wasn't the first time the teen had pointed a gun at him, but it was the first time his hands didn't shake.

Schlatt's dress shoes clicked as he took his first steps into the warehouse and Tubbo pulled the trigger. The villain stumbled at the force of it, but didn't seem otherwise phased.

Frustration and rage sparked in his chest, setting his whole body alight with an unfamiliar buzzing under his skin. He pulled the trigger again, and again, and *again* but Schlatt merely stumbled as he slowly closed the distance between them.

The only sounds in the warehouse were Schlatt's dress shoes clacking against the hard floors, the deafening cracks of gunshots as Tubbo landed hit after hit directly on the villain, and the heartbreaking, grief and frustration filled shouting and swearing pouring from the teen's mouth as Schlatt pressed ever closer.

Tubbo hardly heard any of it over the ringing and roaring blood in his ears, making his head feel like it was stuffed with cotton and his vision began to blur. It felt like centuries before Schlatt reached him, but it was probably just seconds.

Tubbo silently counted every shot until he was sure there was only one bullet left and sank to his knees with a broken sob.

Crumb was probably *dead*. Emma had stolen her powers before Hellcat killed her, so whatever slim chance there was of her powers holding her together was shattered.

Crumb, the sweet, chaotic, brave girl that he met when she saved Endwalker and Captain Sparklez's lives years ago, *died* trying to rescue *him*. Pinned to the fucking wall by Minx's spear like an insect on a pin, small body unmoving and on display.

Sparklez was no doubt bleeding out fast and Ranboo got *shot*. He hadn't been wearing his Endwalker jacket so was he even wearing a kevlar vest? *Were they both dead too?*

His tear-blurred vision was filled by Schlatt's shoes and he distantly heard a disappointed sigh from above.

"You know, kid," he started, crouching down to Tubbo's level even though the teen refused to look up, "on one hand I'm proud, I really am. But, as nice as it is that you finally learned how to use that thing," he gestured to the gun still in Tubbo's grip, "without my hand on your shoulder, I'm pretty fucking *pissed* that you used it to take out my closest business partners. And you ruined a perfectly good suit too."

A gentle hand on his chin tipped his head up until he was looking Schlatt in the eye, his vision still swimming with tears and exhaustion.

As a last act of defiance, Tubbo managed a weak glare before jerking the gun up under his own chin and pulling the trigger one last time.

The resounding click of an empty chamber was louder than any gunshot.

It was like a slap in the face when Tubbo remembered the first shot he fired. He shot the man guarding him in the foot when Endwalker arrived.

Tubbo was a fucking *idiot*.

He involuntarily let out a broken whine while Schlatt chuckled quietly, stroking a gentle hand over his hair.

“Guess you gotta learn how to count, huh?” he teased, moving his hands from Tubbo’s face to wrap him up in a sick imitation of a hug, the gun pressed between them, still raised in Tubbo’s hand. “It’s okay though, we’re gonna have *plenty* of time to clean up your messes now, aren’t we?”

The gun slipped from Tubbo’s weak grip, thumping heavily against his thigh before clattering to the ground. His whole body followed, going limp like a puppet with its strings cut and sagging into Schlatt’s arms.

The overpowering smell of whiskey and cigars only made him cry harder as he buried his face in Schlatt’s shoulder and *screamed*.

Schlatt’s arms were gentle and warm around him until what little fumes he had been running on burned up. Exhausted and grief-stricken, he couldn’t even remember passing out in the villains’ arms.

I think it needs more salt

I think you should shut up

e

EEEEEE

Nah it needs rosemary

Are we just not gonna talk about the fact that Dadza is a literal god???

No hes not, Techno’s the Blood God now

BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD

NO! SALT FOR THE BLOOD GOD’S POTATOES

I SAID ROSEMARY DAMMIT!

EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE—

“For Prime’s sake chat just *shut up*, ” Techno snarled under his breath as the wooden spatula handle in his hand snapped. He growled, giving the baby potatoes in the pan a menacing glare. “Do you *ever* stop talking?”

Techno mad

Sorry!

Guys shut up

L spatula

Stop telling people to shut up

Techno mad

Rip spatula, you will be missed

o7 for the spatulas

SPATULAS FOR THE BLOOD GOD

o7

Don't make me ban you—

Outside thunder boomed as the storm raged on with little end in sight. According to weather reports, Tempest's powers had managed to create an entirely new rainstorm over the county that would continue to play out along with natural weather patterns. Thankfully it seemed like the winds were heading out to sea instead of further inland, but it would still be a few days worth of harsh weather.

It had only been a few hours since the storm started but thankfully Phil had managed to answer a few of his texts since arriving at the hospital behind his injured interns.

His texts to Wilbur, however, still remained unanswered from two days ago. He hadn't answered a single call or text from anyone after he left the hospital, which did nothing to ease the air of rising tension in the city, and what was left of their family.

In the few hours since the villain fight ended, the news had run wild with it. Twenty-three cops dead and two interns in the ER combined with both Tempest and Vex-Wing's returning debut fight was not something that was going to fly under the radar. All Techno could do was be thankful nobody was circulating rumours that Tempest was using Trigger or something crazy like that.

As it was now, Techno was home alone at Phil's townhouse, trying to make dinner while his intrusive internal monologue felt the need to offer commentary on his every activity. That was the second spatula he had snapped in the last half hour and he was hesitant to even get another one.

Maybe he could just use his hands? Piglin's had a naturally higher heat resistance and thicker skin, he doubted it would do any damage.

LMAOOOOO DO IT

The forbidden cooking tool has been unlocked

Spatula life rights! Cook with the claws!

I mean you could just learn how to control your own strength but go off I guess

Techno sighed in defeat, tossing the snapped spatula on the counter next to its fallen brethren.

Did he logically know he was lucky to even be alive after getting hit with the Synthetic Trigger? Sure. But he was still getting pretty pissed about it, there were so many little things that were just starting to drive him crazy. The voices included.

Even as it was, he had the sneaking suspicion that the voices actually had very little to do with the side effects of his transformation. It had taken very minimal amounts of research to deduce that they weren't a piglin trait or a symptom of some psychotic break.

They did, unfortunately, remind him of an old story he was told growing up, about how a fully-fledged incarnation of the Blood God could draw on the voices of his past lives for wisdom and guidance in battle. The only similarity between his experience and the stories was the hearing voices part. His chat wasn't very wise, though, and only seemed to want to guide him towards blood and more salt on his food.

Maybe his voices were broken because he never finished the blood-rites in the traditional way. Not that he *wanted* to, but it was an explanation. Maybe.

Either way, the evidence was starting to pile up and Techno was having a hard time denying what he secretly always thought was true, at least on some level.

Between Styx, Foolish and Karl Jacobs being weirdly cryptic every time they spoke to him and the voices occasionally throwing him for a loop with weird cultist phrases, a larger and larger part of him was starting to think that maybe, just *maybe*, the cult that raised him may not have been that wrong after all.

Maybe Techno *was* the modern-day Blood God, but even if that was the case it didn't change the fact that he missed the ability to just have some gods-damned *peace and quiet*.

The voices collectively laughed at his misery, and he sighed. *Would* he be able to not break a third spatula?

Apparently, the entire universe seemed against the idea of silence. The relatively peaceful air in the kitchen was shattered by the familiar *vwoop* sound of a teleport. Techno's head shot up at the sound of an inhuman screeching noise followed by glass shattering as a black-clad figure slammed into the wall of family photos just outside of the kitchen doorway.

Techno had a knife in his hand before he even knew what was happening. The voices in his head immediately *exploded* into shouting and calls for blood.

The lanky figure in the sitting room writhed as made a new grating noise that reminded Techno of the rare times he had to defend himself from an actual enderman while traveling through the nether. It was the kind of hacking yelp they made when injured, as opposed to the angry screech they had started with after appearing.

Techno stared in utter confusion for a moment before it clicked. That was Ranboo's rain jacket and Endwalker's face mask.

“Oh for the love of—” he tossed the knife on the counter and turned off the stove's burner before making his way to the vigilante's side.

The ender-like hacking quickly faded into sharp gasps of pain as Ranboo's gloved hands clawed uselessly at the zipper of his jacket and clutched at a spot in the middle of his abdomen.

RanHurt

Oh no

Aw not AGAIN

Days since Ranboo got a life threatening injury: 0

OH GODS NOT HIM TOO

RANHURT

TechnoHelp

TechnoSupport

Aw man I kinda liked that kid

o7 to all the fallen comrades this dark day

Techno resolutely ignored whatever *that* implied as he reached out to help Ranboo, immediately freezing when the teen flinched away.

“Hey kid, it's just me. Techno, remember?” he said in his best attempt of a soothing tone. “You're hurt, I just want to help.”

His gaze flicked over the kid, looking for any signs of what was causing him pain but finding nothing obvious like blood. Just a tense body that shook with exertion.

“Cr— *Crumb*, ” the teen sobbed, the movement immediately making him curl in on himself.

“Okay, let's just worry about you first, huh?” he suggested, moving significantly slower this time as he reached to check him over.

He gently helped the teen remove the jacket and mask, quickly discovering the problem embedded in the front of the kevlar vest he wore under his thin rain jacket,

One large tear in the front of the vest still shined with the bullet lodged inside.

Techno grimaced. That was why netherite reinforcements were standard issue for all hero-grade gear. Netherite absorbed kinetic force in any form, minimizing any impact on the wearer so long as the projectile wasn't also netherite. Kevlar? Not so much. Ranboo would be lucky if he didn't have any broken ribs, but it was better than bleeding out.

Just another example as to why The Blade took up teenage vigilante cases; most of them weren't even smart enough to get ahold of a bullet-proof vest in his experience.

Still, while it would be well within reason enough for the average teenage vigilante to freak out like this, he knew for a fact Ranboo wasn't that inexperienced. It hadn't even been a week since he watched the kid take a crossbow bolt to the side and keep on fighting, not making a pained noise anywhere *near* as panicked as those ender-like sounds.

Something else was wrong.

Now free of the vest he expected the kid might relax, knowing he hadn't actually been shot, but if anything he seemed more tense. Techno watched with growing discomfort as Ranboo slowly pulled his knees up to his chest and tucked his head between them with a shuddering breath.

NOT CRUMB

Poor girl

RanSad

Do you think the others will make it?

So many deaths today

They're too young —

"Who's...Crumb?" Techno found himself asking hesitantly when the voices became too confusing to bear. This was *not* how he wanted his evening to go, yet here he was.

He grimaced when Ranboo flinched, somehow curling in on himself further. This was usually the point in a hero-related problem that Techno would hand the person off to Phil or Wilbur. They would always be better with people than him.

But, as it was, Phil was busy and Wilbur was pissed and MIA. Even then, Techno had promised to keep the kids secret for some reason, so he'd just have to figure it out on his own.

"Ranboo?" he said quietly, ignoring the chorus of *TechnoSoft* that flooded his mind.

"Amnesia," Ranboo answered immediately, his voice muffled by how his face was still buried in his legs. "Or— or Calico, Captain Sparklez new intern."

Techno...wasn't sure how to respond to that.

Of course, it wasn't *that* surprising that Sparklez had convinced his vigilante friend to go legit, but Techno had never had confirmation that Amnesia was a kid. However, if she was an intern, not a sidekick, that would have to be the case.

Chat also seemed to think she was dead, which wasn't great.

“I think she’s dead,” Ranboo muttered weakly, as if reading Techno’s mind. He finally lifted his head to rest his chin on his knees. “Maybe Sparklez too. I sent them to a hospital but…” he trailed off, eyes unfocused as he stared into the middle ground.

Techno made sure to keep his face carefully neutral as something dark flickered in his chest, spurring on the voices as they called for blood.

Not yet, he thought firmly, *we don’t know whose blood yet*.

To his pleasant surprise, the voices quieted to a low murmur, voice layering into simple white noise instead of a constant stream of meaningless chatter.

“Who did it?” he asked.

Maybe a more appropriate question would have been *what happened?* or *Are you alright?* But that wasn’t really what he wanted to know. He’d figure out what happened and he knew Ranboo wasn’t alright. He just needed a name and a place to start.

Ranboo’s mismatched eyes flicked to him for a moment before going to the window, watching the rain pour down outside.

“Hellcat, but she’s dead too,” he said after a beat. “Haywire shot her the second the spear left her hand.”

Good, the darker part of his instincts purred. The logical side of his brain, however, was rather displeased that Haywire had even been a part of that situation, much less committing murder while still in high school.

“I thought Haywire was staying with Guardian while the rest of the network ran security to keep Schlatt away,” Techno frowned.

“I… I don’t know. We haven’t talked in weeks and then he called me out of the blue, asking me to check out a safehouse. Then once I was there I ran into—” his voice cracked weakly. “I ran into the heroes and got a distress signal from Tubbo, we went in blind because I thought it would just be a smash and grab.”

Techno shifted awkwardly where he was crouched before deciding to sit on the floor across from the vigilante, nodding for him to continue.

Ranboo visibly swallowed and took a deep breath before continuing. “Schlatt’s the one that shot me. It hurt enough that I lost my grip on Tubbo, but I was already just— I don’t know, I can’t really remember what happened. I just felt, like, out of it after Crumb—” his voice cracked again, but he didn’t try to continue this time.

“So Schlatt has Tubbo again?” Techno asked, trying to steer the conversation away from the dead girl. In all honesty, Techno didn’t really want to think about it too hard either.

And as depressing as it was, in the grand scheme of things, Tubbo *was* more important. They had let the Trigger case stall for too long and now they were paying the price, good people

dead and a major player back in Schlatt's hands. At least he lost his biggest business partner in the process, but it was still too high of a cost for the heroes.

"Yeah," Ranboo confirmed, the tension in his form starting to fade as he sagged with visible exhaustion. "I mean maybe Tubbo shot him, but I doubt that'll keep him down for long. They've got good healers."

Techno sighed. This was...less than ideal. Of course, the voices were trying to work back up to chanting for blood now that they had a name, but Techno ignored it.

Things seemed to be going downhill fast on all fronts. Those opposing Schlatt were losing ground and numbers by the day as Trigger-powered criminals started to put nearly every hero they faced in the ICU or worse. And all that while the mysterious force Karl Jacobs warned him about had gone unnoticed and was crawling out of every nook and cranny to bite them in the ass when they weren't looking.

Schlatt had Tubbo. Phil was in the hospital *again*, while Wilbur wouldn't answer his goddamn phone and Tommy was a ghost in the wind. And Techno himself was technically still out on medical leave, meaning the Tempest agency had no active pro-level heroes to keep pressing onwards.

There was one problem that was certainly the least pressing, yet somehow the one his instincts screamed at him to solve first. But first things first.

"Think you can stomach some food right now?" he asked Ranboo, noting how the kid's head was starting to list to the side as the adrenaline crash caught up with him. "Or do we have to get you home before you pass out?"

Ranboo blinked slowly, eyes slightly unfocused. "Food is good," he muttered.

"Food is good," Techno agreed, offering a hand to pull the other to his feet.

It took a few minutes to get Ranboo situated at the kitchen's island in a way that wouldn't result in him tipping over if he passed out, but they awkwardly managed. Techno returned to the still warm food on the stove, inspecting the stirfry and potatoes before turning the burners back on and picking up where he left off.

Every once in awhile he would glance back to check on Ranboo, whose eyes had glazed over as he stared out the kitchen window in the direction of the flooding lake.

Techno frowned. Maybe a healing potion wouldn't hurt. He was pretty sure Phil had restocked some in his room after Tommy's close call the week he arrived.

They ate in silence, Techno taking the seat next to the boy in case he had to save him from toppling over as he sat up unsteadily. He waited to see Ranboo take a few bites on his own before touching his dinner.

Finally tasting his own food, he noted with annoyance that the potatoes could use some more rosemary.

HAHA I WAS RIGHT

BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD

...still needs more salt

EEEEEE

SHUT UP I WIN

SCHLATTS BLOOD

E

o7 fallen spatulas that sacrificed themselves for this meal

They finished the meal in relative silence, the space between the hero and vigilante filled only by the distant rumbling of thunder and the unstoppable force of the wind and rain against the side of the townhouse.

Ranboo only ate about half the serving but Techno didn't comment as he collected the dishes. Afterwards, he quickly ran upstairs to retrieve a healing pot, figuring the rest of Ranboo's time here would be spent in silence before he sent the boy home.

Techno didn't really know how to comfort him in this situation, but he did what he could by making sure he was taken care of and giving him space.

"Have you ever lost someone, Techno?" Ranboo said suddenly, making Techno pause where he was trying to portion half of a healing potion out of the glass bottle.

He glanced back at the teen to find that not much had changed, his gaze still distant as he now leaned back against the counter, staring at the pile of shattered picture frames he'd knocked down in the sitting room.

The memory of blurry security footage and a lanky figure collapsing from a bullet to the head came to him unbidden. But then again, there was a chance he was still alive after all.

"No," Techno admitted after a moment, turning back to the potion with a frown. "Plenty of close calls, but I've never lost someone I actually cared about."

Theseus hadn't exactly been a friend anyway.

Ranboo nodded slowly, drawing a hand around his bruised abdomen. "I just thought I would be used to it by now," he said as Techno handed him the half-strength potion in a mug. They were somehow out of drinking glasses, nobody had been home long enough to actually clean up in recent days.

It was a strong statement, one that said a lot about Ranboo's life experiences despite being so young. It was also a statement he had no real answer to, having no comparable experiences to relate at all.

“I’m sorry,” he settled on eventually. “Drink the whole cup and then you should head home. I’m pretty certain Niki won’t be too happy if you vanish again so soon after the last incident.”

Ranboo nodded and did so without another word, Techno hovering awkwardly until he saw a little life return to his eyes.

After a moment of debate, he offered to take care of the ruined kevlar vest and raincoat in favour of sending Ranboo back in one of his old jackets. Though he seemed more aware now, the teen was still quiet when he agreed.

A few minutes later Techno was alone again, watching the purple particles fade. He sighed, turning back to the kitchen to clean up.

He mentally ran through his options while doing the dishes, the repetitive work keeping his hands busy while his mind raced.

Of the major issues starting to cause conflict in Techno’s life, there was only one that could be relatively easy to solve and didn’t require getting permission to do hero work in the field again. But thus far, it had been just as challenging as trying to find a solution to the whole Trigger epidemic or the corrosive powers of the bloodvines.

They had tried everything to find Tommy with no success and gone through all the logical places to look for Wilbur without results. Finding his brothers should technically be at the bottom of the priorities list, but even the voices seemed to be pressing for that option first.

There was one thing they hadn’t tried yet. But up until this point he had stubbornly held onto his grudge against Dream, not wanting to let the man anywhere near his brothers, adoptive or foster. Unfortunately, they didn’t call him the manhunter for nothing.

There was a reason they put Dream on the case of the vigilante who could escape to the other side of the city in a heartbeat.

He picked up on the third ring.

“Hello?”

“Dream,” Techno greeted as casually as he could. In his head, the voices laughed and teased him mercilessly.

He could hear the smug tone in the other voice even through the phone. “*Blade, to what do I owe the pleasure?*”

Techno narrowly resisted the urge to sigh, rolling his eyes to an empty house. *Asshole.*

“I’m afraid,” he grumbled, wishing this wasn’t as embarrassing as it suddenly felt, “I have to ask you for a personal favour.”

Dream hummed, the sound laced with poorly concealed amusement. “*My favours don’t come cheap Blade.*”

“I know. But whatever you want in return, I’ll do it,” he replied, words like acid on his tongue as the voices howled at his misery. “This is important.”

This time Dream actually laughed. “*Well then, what do you need me to do?*”

Chapter End Notes

[TW Section summary:]

Tubbo enhances Ranboos powers too much, making him shut down for a minute. Emma goes to attack Captain Sparklez, managing to bite him very hard in the neck. Hellcat backs off Sparklez and throws her spear at an injured Crumb, hitting her in the chest seemingly killing her instantly. In retaliation Tubbo shoots Hellcat in the head, killing her. Sparklez blasts Emma away with his powers, making the injury to his throat much worse. Ranboo teleports Sparklez and Crumb away with his enhanced powers, leaving only him and Tubbo.

Schlatt and Minx's men break back into the warehouse followed by Schlat and Quackity. Ranboo rushes Schlatt and Schlatt shoots him in the chest, but he teleports away before hitting the ground. Tubbo looks to Emma, who is badly injured but still alive. Emma rushes to attack Tubbo and Tubbo shoots her twice, killing her.

[End Summary.]

I apologized in advance and I will apologize again here, but only a little bit. Actions have consequences, the heroes didn't get their shit together fast enough and Schlatt got tired of waiting.

That said, there's a *lot* of moving parts here so I'm trying my best with the pacing but bear with me. Lots of meeting of storylines as reveals to come :)

Also I have a brand new [Discord Server](#) that you should check out! There's already some cool people in there who love to yell about JOM theories and dsmf fics in general. 10/10, highly recommend.

If you've made it this far and don't hate me too much, make sure to leave kudos and a comment. Or, you can leave a comment if you hate me too lol, a lot just happened so I'll forgive you for it.

Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

The fallout of Tempest's storm makes a mission go very wrong for Spectre and his interns.

Tempest and Aegis wait for news about their injured allies and run into old friends under poor circumstances.

([Hero-intern character design art](#))

Chapter Notes

Hello! There's a lot happening in this chapter and it's been a while since I've updated here's a key with names to remind you if you're confused!

Spectre - George

Mania - Aimsey

Reaper - Chayanne (changed from Billzo to respect boundaries)

Beep - (Tubbos BearSMP character, not the same as jom!Tubbo)

Onyx - Badboyhalo

Refractz - Punz

CPK - Seepeakay (newer dsmp member)

Tycoon - Scar (GoodTimesWithScar)

Tempest - Phil

Aegis - Freddie (Badlinu)

Venus - Beau

Cyberonix - Eryn

Calico - Crumb

There are some parts where the hero and personal names switch back and forth and can be confusing if you haven't read in a while, so sorry about that.

This isn't my favourite chapter ever but it needed to be done and this is as good as it's getting, so thank you for reading and enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“I think the worst of the storm’s clearing up,” Spectre called over the sound of rushing water from further up the tunnel. “Mind checking for me, Mania?”

Aimsey looked up from the small weave of string and beads she was working on, making Chayanne curse as she accidentally shined her flashlight directly in his face. She snorted and dropped the light from between her teeth to spare him.

“Sure, just a moment!” she called back before shuffling to tuck away the half-finished mess of the orange and white friendship bracelet.

She needed to get more beads soon anyway, it would be rude to give Crumb a half-finished piece when everyone else had such intricate ones.

Chayanne had teased her for including the bracelet in her mission kit, considering their group was going to investigate the tunnels for signs of a smuggling operation the Dream Agency was looking into. And though she was thankful for it now, Aimsey hadn’t really imagined that she’d have the time to work on it due to a flash flood in the underground river tunnels. Yet, here they were.

Now Aimsey was perched on a small ledge next to a bored Chayanne, in one of the larger connecting service tunnels that were just tall enough to avoid flooding completely like some of the smaller sections. Though it had originally been Spectre’s idea for them to wait it out, he was the first to risk swimming upstream to find the nearest exit.

She glanced past Chayanne at the unseen figure floating just over his shoulder. Beep didn’t see her trying to get his attention, too busy looking down at Chayanne’s phone as he scrolled aimlessly.

When neither the ghost nor the other intern noticed her she cleared her throat, making them both look up. Beep smiled and waved while Chayanne glared at her behind his skull mask.

“The hell you bothering me for?” he grumbled. “Don’t you have some weird clairvoyant shit to be doing?”

Aimsey glared at him before looking back at Beep. The ghost smiled and his face shifted slightly, making him look unsettlingly like her friend from the general education class, Tubbo. She knew Beep tended to steal looks because he couldn’t remember his own face sometimes, but she *really* hated it when he decided to take after people she knew.

“Yeah I just need to try and check how bad the storm above is, or if there’s backup on the way,” she said, directing it more as a request of Beep than an actual explanation Chayanne would care about.

“Then why the hell are you tellin’ me ‘bout it when you could be doing it already?” he said with a roll of his eyes. “Jeez man, I don’t get you sometimes.”

Behind him, Beep gave her a confused look before one of understanding passed over his blank eyes. He grinned and saluted her.

Don’t you worry Aimsey! That storm’ll never know what hit it! He announced before vanishing.

Hopefully, he wouldn't get too distracted this time. He had been having a bit more trouble remembering things recently.

"Not my fault you're dense," Aimsey teased before shifting to cross her legs in a meditative position.

Chayanne started to protest rather loudly but she shushed him harshly, closing her eyes and pretending to activate her "clairvoyant abilities."

She heard splashing over the rushing water as Spectre returned, hauling himself up onto the ledge on the other side of Chayanne. Their supervisor whispered back and forth with Chayanne for a bit but Aimsey tuned them out, listening for Beep's return with the news.

In all honesty, Aimsey wasn't even sure what she was doing here anymore. She knew how much of a risk it was just to step into the hero scene with her "powers," but she really had to go and make it worse by interning at the *Dream Agency* of all places.

If there was one hero who would absolutely rat her out for having unregistered innate magic, it was Dream. However there were only so many non-combat powered heroes in the city that Mania could learn from, and with her friends all stealing the opportunity to train under Whisper this term, Spectre was the second-best choice.

How training with Spectre ended up getting them trapped in a slowly flooding underground river, with two working flashlights and no new evidence for the case they were trying to work, was a mystery to her.

Eventually, she heard the odd whispering that usually followed distressed ghosts. Despite herself, the unnatural sound of it made her large rabbit ears twitch.

She frowned as one voice became two, became three and continued to grow. Blinking her eyes open in confusion, Aimsey was met with dozens of transparent forms floating just under the surface of the water and beginning to gather above it.

She stifled a gasp, going rigid at the sight. More and more blank eyes and faces appeared, filling up the water below and the cramped space around the perimeter of the tunnel.

Aimsey wasn't sure she had ever seen so many ghosts in her whole *life*.

"Mania?" Spectre asked quietly. "What's wrong?"

Then some of the ghosts started to *speak*.

Oh, Prime, they're just kids, a woman gasped, covering her mouth as her eyes went wide in shock.

I wish we could warn them, a tired voice said. Aimsey followed it to the man in a half-burnt fireman uniform.

A man in a business suit laughed. *It's not like it would make a difference, they're already surrounded and were trapped before we even got here.*

Wait, I think she's looking at you, someone else said, making the business suit guy frown.

A cold hand closed around Aimsey's shoulder, making her gasp and flinch away. She whipped around to find Beep with a blank look on his face, withdrawing his hand from her arm.

There are four villains waiting to ambush you guys, he whispered in a small voice. *They're gonna kill you and Chayanne so they can take Spectre alive. Someone needs his powers.*

"Mania, what's wrong?" Spectre said in a firm tone, his mouth set in a grim line. "What are you seeing?"

"An ambush," she gasped, trying to ignore just how cold all the dead surrounding them made the room feel. "There's—"

Between them Chayanne suddenly flinched, scrambling backwards away from the edge of the water with a curse. The flashlight on the ledge started to roll in a circle as he brushed against it, making the lighting shift ominously over the water and across the walls.

Beep abruptly vanished from between them, only for Aimsey to see Chayanne clutching at his arm before yanking his hand away, fist closed around something.

He uncurled his fingers, revealing a small glass dart resting in his palm. "What the fuck—"

"*Trigger,*" Spectre hissed, snatching the vial from his hand to inspect it. "That's definitely a Trigger dart. Reaper, your powers—"

"Doesn't matter what his powers are," An impossibly deep voice boomed, making Aimsey's bones shake the same way they would when standing next to a huge bass speaker, **"he'll lose control of them enough to distract you."**

A shadow on the wall across from them shifted and darkened as the light continued circling. It slowly twisted and morphed before solidifying into the figure of a man, crouched on the opposite ledge.

The man's face was obscured by a gleaming metal mask that looked like an imitation of huge, grotesque teeth punctured through a streamlined gas mask. The mask continued up the right side of his face to cover his eye with a glowing purple lens while his visible eye glowed a low, threatening red.

To Aimsey's surprise, the large ears poking through his curls twitched as he tilted his head towards her. He was a rabbit hybrid like her, though his visible fur was pitch black in contrast to Aimsey's own bright white.

Her ears involuntarily pressed flat against her head and he chuckled, making the entire room seem to shake. **"Almost a shame,"** he said, teasing lilt in his voice lost under the fear coursing through Aimsey's veins. **"But don't worry, we'll make it quick."**

Spectre carefully rose to his feet and moved to stand between the villain and the scared interns. Beside Aimsey, Chayanne was starting to breathe heavily, fingers tangling through

his hair as he curled in on himself.

“Why don’t we just talk this out,” Spectre suggested, seeming completely calm as he gently nudged Aimsey with his foot. “There’s no need to drag the interns into it, it’s their first patrol.”

That was a bald-faced lie, and one she doubted would work in the first place, based on the number of young-faced spirits crowded into the room around them.

There are two heroes responding to the emergency call, Beep whispered, reappearing at Aimsey’s side as she unsteadily pushed to her feet. Tycoon and CPK. But there are bloodvine heroes on their way too, Onyx and Refractz.

“Is that good or bad?” she muttered just below a whisper. What was a *bloodvine* ?

Very bad, Beep replied.

“We’ve watched you long enough to know that’s not true, Spectre,” the villain boomed. **“Nice try though.”**

“There’s three more villains with him,” Aimsey said just loud enough for Spectre to hear. “And two more on the way.”

Also technically a lie, but it got the message across.

“If that’s the case then your problem is with me, not them,” Spectre said to the villain, as though Aimsey hadn’t spoken at all. “Why not just let them go?”

Behind them, Chayanne made a pained choking noise and Aimsey risked a moment to look back at him.

She tensed even further at the sight of black webs of veins making themselves visible against his pale skin. The usually red aura that came with his erosion powers was more of a sickly grey as the cement around him began to crumble and decay. He let out a strangled shout and threw his head back, revealing the dark veins in his neck as the aura expanded outwards and brushed against both Spectre and Aimsey.

Aimsey yelped in surprise then quickly shouted in pain as her exposed fingers began to take on a grey tinge and *burn* worse than the time she dropped a beaker of acid in chemistry class. Spectre flinched but made no visible reaction to the effects.

The veins in her hands started to darken to black, feeling like flaming acid under her skin as she stumbled away from Chayanne.

Withering. An effect mainly caused by wither roses and not much else in the modern world. Those few wither hybrids that remained rarely possessed the true ability, making it something Aimsey had only ever seen in history classes.

So Trigger really could turn people into hybrids. *Shit.*

Clutching her hands close to her chest, Aimsey turned a glare on the villain, staring through dozens of transparent bodies between them.

The other rabbit hybrid chuckled again, the deep sound reverberating in the small space as Chayanne shouted in pain again.

“BABUSHKA.”

This time the sound of his voice was deafening, making every bone in Aimsey’s body ache with the unfamiliar resonance of it. Her arms shot up over her head to try and cover her sensitive ears with a pained cry of her own.

Spectre, once again, seemed far less affected as he activated his powers, throwing up half a dozen identical illusions of both himself and Aimsey. The fake Spectres all ran in different directions but didn’t cause quite enough confusion as a pair of hands shot up from the water and managed to snag the real Spectre’s ankles, dragging the blue-clad hero into the water with the new villain.

Behind you! an unfamiliar ghost cried.

Aimsey whipped around just in time to dodge away from a man in an expensive-looking black suit as he seemed to melt out of the shadows the same way the rabbit villain had.

The water below churned violently before Spectre resurfaced with a gasp, managing to drag himself up onto the ledge with the rabbit villain. Another splash heralded the appearance of the villain from the water, a woman in a black jumpsuit with long dark hair and glowing red eyes.

The flashlight finally stopped spinning, the light pointing directly at Aimsey’s back and casting the black-suited villain in her shadow.

Every beat of her heart was nearly as deafening as the ringing in her ears from the rabbit villain’s voice. Yet despite how loud everything felt she knew the tunnel was near-silent, even the ghosts watching on bated breath.

“Don’t touch him Sykkuno,” the man in front of her said, startling her back into awareness of her own surroundings. “He looks like a wither hybrid.”

Aimsey shifted, turning so she had her back facing the wall behind her and everyone else in the room in her sightlines. There was another dark-haired man standing over Chayanne with a knife in hand, this one wearing a green suit so dark it was black at first glance.

“They sent out a distress signal when the flooding started,” the villain— Sykunno— said evenly as he casually flipped the knife in his hand. “There’s already more heroes heading this way.”

“Well, like Corpse said,” the black-suited villain sighed, pulling a gun out from under his blazer, “we’ll make this quick.”

“You should go home, Tempest.”

Phil leaned his head back against the wall, blinking wearily. He glanced over at Aegis with a frown.

“You did not just tell the founder of the hero agency you work for to just go home,” he said, caught somewhere between disbelief and confusion.

They were sitting on the floor in a mostly abandoned hallway near the surgery wing of Sky Memorial Hospital. Usually, the entire hero wing had good security and plenty of space and privacy, leaving lots of open spaces for uninjured heroes to wait in comfort, but today had too many mass emergencies to waste the resources the hero wards offered.

An explosion in the upper shopping district happened in the middle of the Tempest Agency’s original altercation with the bank robber. A villain with sonic powers attacked a middle school. An affiliate hero and three sidekicks were left alone to defend city hall from an attempt to kidnap the mayor. A seemingly coordinated series of Trigger-powered villains attacked the agencies that recently announced a number of heroes returning from retirement.

All of it in the hours just before and following Tempest’s hurricane, the damage from which only made things harder to manage and sent more people running for the nearest hospital.

It seemed like every ounce of luck Phil had received when he begged for Kirstin’s powers to aid him in destroying the bloodvines had turned into bad luck somewhere else in the city. Everything had its price with magic, he regretted not thinking of it sooner with the way things were going.

“As the resident field medic and general protector of people, I think I know someone that needs to step back when I see one,” Aegis said in a rather self-assured tone.

Phil snorted. “I’m not exactly doing much mate, we’re just sitting here.”

“When you *could* be sitting at home,” the teen reiterated. “You already got chewed out by Eryn’s brother, and Beau’s aunt is in the waiting room, there’s nothing else for you to do here. Go home and get some real rest, it’s literally your first day back on the job.”

And what a day it had been.

“Well mate, we still gotta wait for your parents. So until I’m sure you’re alright I’m not going anywhere just yet.”

He watched closely as Freddie pulled a face somewhere between discomfort and longing before smoothing his expression back over. “I’m sixteen, sir,” he said with a wry smile, “I don’t need a babysitter every second of the day.”

Phil studied him for a moment longer, noting how forced the light humour was. How tense he got at the mention of his parents. It made something sad settle in his chest.

“Your parents aren’t coming to get you, are they?” He asked after a moment.

The teen offered him a strained smile. “It’s fine, my dad just works a lot and my mom’s sick. I can get home on my own just this once. Promise”

Phil sighed quietly, his headache making itself known again. There wasn’t enough Tylenol in the world to make that pain go away.

“I used to tell my teachers the same thing when I was your age,” he admitted after a beat. “But it was a lie. No kid should have to grow up like that, mate.”

Phil tipped his head back against the wall again and closed his eyes, waiting for Freddie to choose where the conversation continued. It wasn’t his place to force it.

“It’s... it’s not a complete lie,” the teen said after a moment. “My mom’s sick and it takes a lot out of her to leave the house,” he explained quietly.

Phil frowned, opening his eyes to look at Freddie again. “And your father? When was the last time you actually saw him?”

Freddie smiled, though the expression bled bitterness before he even spoke. “An hour ago. He was the surgeon that met the team taking Eryn from the ER.”

“Ah,” Phil replied intelligently. He wasn’t really sure how to respond to that information, he had the feeling there was more to it but there was no point in digging. All he needed to know was that there was, in fact, no one coming to pick Freddie up.

“Yeah,” the intern sighed, leaning his own head back against the wall. “Could be worse I guess,” he chuckled.

Before Phil’s tired brain could really come up with a response the double doors at the end of the hall burst open as four people pushed into the space.

Or more accurately, four people entered but only three were walking. The hero in a familiar maroon jacket and top hat had a small body in his arms, wrapped in a stained cloak and light blue armour.

The third hero, a young man in a skull-shaped mask and a leather jacket, stumbled to the nearest wall and immediately collapsed while the lone nurse in scrubs hovered anxiously around him.

The nurse was the first to speak. “Are you sure—”

“Reaper! Mania!” Aegis yelled, scrambling to his feet and rushing down the hall towards the group. He made a beeline for the boy in the skull mask, reaching for him only for all of them to shout at him.

“Don’t touch him!”

“Careful!”

“Oi dickhead, trying to lose your hand? Back off!”

Aegis drew back in confusion, and the maroon-clad hero, Tycoon, sighed.

“So far anyone that’s touched him has gotten withered,” Tycoon explained, slowly trying to crouch with the girl still in his arms, a look of pain painting his expression.

With a start, Phil remembered that the last time he saw Tycoon, the man had been wheelchair-bound. He immediately spotted the complex leg braces Scar wore and rushed to take the girl from his arms before he hurt himself.

Scar sighed in relief as the weight was lifted. “Thanks man, be careful though I’m not too sure if the withering can transfer or something.”

Phil looked down at the girl in his arms as he gently lowered them to the floor.

Her skin was an unhealthy pale shade, nearing a grey that made the darkening veins on her neck and face stand out. Her dark hair was soaking wet and matted in places, making the limp white rabbit ears stand out despite how dirty they were with blood and grime.

She was also barely breathing.

Deciding he didn’t want to risk missing it if she stopped breathing at all, he settled her against his chest. He moved one of his hands to cradle the back of her neck and settled two fingers against her pulse, his heart sinking at how faint it already was.

He looked up at Tycoon as the other pro settled on the floor with a grunt.

“You still carry potions on you?” Phil asked hopefully. “She’ll probably need—”

“A milk-based healing and regen mix,” Scar finished, already digging through the satchel at his side. “Yeah I just—” he heaved a breath, “brought us back here for some space for me to work on it.”

“I think I’m gonna throw up,” the other intern muttered.

“Please don’t,” Aegis said, turning to look at Tycoon. “How much of that potion will you be able to make?”

“Definitely enough for me and her,” Scar laughed nervously. “Maybe enough for a third dose, why?”

“Reaper looks like he needs stitches and I think there's a good chance I can touch him without getting withered, but I don’t want to risk it if you can’t have another potion on hand.”

Scar hummed in acknowledgement, his hands shaking slightly as he lined up a few bottles of potions that glowed slightly in the lower lights of the back hallway. He dug through the bag, pulling out some empty vials and more bottles before nodding.

He looked to the nurse, still hovering silently nearby. “Why don’t you go get some stuff for the kid to patch up Reaper? I have enough for an extra dose if we need it and I’d say it’s worth a shot.”

“R-right. Sure thing,” the nurse stammered before running back out the door they came through.

Scar worked in relative silence, only occasionally broken by the sounds of voices and footsteps outside the nearby door.

Phil watched with growing trepidation, his nerves already set on edge by the weak pulse under his hand. Scar’s gloved hands started to shake slightly, the visible skin of his wrist turning an ashy grey and the veins on his neck darkening to black webs under his skin.

“Tycoon—”

“I’m alright Wing, don’t you worry,” Scar cut him off, falling back on the nickname from their days as vigilantes. “I’ve almost got it.”

Despite how nerve-wracking it was to watch, Phil would always be amazed by Scar’s mastery over magic. If anyone without training tried to mix potions the way he did, it would probably render the mixture useless or explosive, but not Scar, even when under duress.

By the time the nurse returned with a cart of medical supplies, Scar had three small vials prepared, all a milky white substance with an unnatural shine to them.

“Alrighty, bottoms up, I guess,” Scar muttered, throwing back one of the vials himself before awkwardly scooting towards Phil and the girl as fast as his leg braces allowed.

Phil removed his hand from the girl's neck, shifting to cradle the back of her head as Scar lifted the vial to her grey lips and slowly poured the contents into her mouth.

They waited with bated breath for a long moment as nothing happened. Phil was about to shift her to check her pulse once more when she suddenly gasped, the colour returning to her face like a light flicking on.

Phil let her go easily when her head shot up and she pushed away from him, stumbling to her feet unsteadily. Her eyes shot wildly around the empty hallway before settling on the other two interns in the corner, then something on the blank wall behind them.

“Aimsey?” Aegis said slowly. “You doing okay there?”

She blinked at him for a moment before answering with a small nod. She turned to look down at Scar. “Wh-where are Spectre and CPK?”

Scar grimaced slightly. “Spectre was taken by those four villains, and CPK stayed back to talk with Onyx and Refractz in the subway tunnels, remember?”

Aimsey glanced back over her shoulder, eyes darting around like she was searching for something despite the hall still being empty. Her ears swivelled, facing to listen behind her even as she faced Reaper and Aegis again.

Phil frowned, making eye contact with Scar for a moment to see if he was having the same thought.

Apparently, Scar seemed to share his questioning look. Her strange behaviour reminded Phil of a certain someone that had the ability to see things others couldn't, though Aimsey seemed to have a bit of a harder time hiding it than Hecate ever did.

"Mania?" Scar asked hesitantly.

"Yeah," she blinked, seeming shaken out of her thoughts. "Sorry, I— I remember. I was just confused for a second."

"No worries, mate," Phil said with a smile, earning him a surprised look of recognition.

"Why don't you sit down for a bit, we're just gonna hang out and see if Aegis can help out Reaper without getting hurt."

Mania frowned, looking at the other interns for a moment before nodding. She sank down to the floor on the opposite side of the hall, noticeably giving Reaper a wide berth.

As it turned out, Aegis was, in fact, immune to the withering effects before even activating his powers. The nurse only got to question it for a moment before Scar steered him off and asked if he could go try to find a bed to put Reaper in after his stitches were done.

Though the nurse seemed bothered, he took the hint and left without much fuss.

"That's some interesting innate magic you've got there kiddo," Scar said, his eyes scanning over the intern in a way that implied he was seeing more than Phil could.

"Could say the same to you, sir," Aegis shot back with a raised brow. "I thought you had the power to turn things you touched to gold, not the ability to mix potions like a master and see magic with your naked eyes."

Scar chuckled weakly and held his hands up in mock surrender. "Alright, alright, we get it. I won't press, just pointing out that there are still people around who could see it if they know how to look."

"I know," the intern answered without elaborating.

And that was that.

Reaper and Aegis bickered the entire time, not unlike the way that Cyberonix liked to pick fights with Venus and Aegis. It was probably safe to assume they were all classmates at Prime Academy, if not friends as well.

Still, Aegis obviously knew what he was doing, which would have been surprising if he hadn't just told Phil his dad was a surgeon.

Scar seemed to be in no rush to go anywhere, relaxing back against the wall next to Phil and typing out a few messages on his wrist communicator. Occasionally he glanced up to check on the interns but otherwise stayed quiet, looking thoroughly exhausted under the lensless mask over his eyes.

Phil found his attention drawn back to Mania every time her head jerked to watch something that wasn't there or she muttered something under her breath. At one point she pulled out a small bag of beads and a half-finished bracelet, though she seemed to just be fiddling with it more than continuing its progress.

She— well, Phil wasn't about to assume anything. He knew his brain was just caught on the idea because of his recent encounter with Kristin, but the thought wouldn't leave his mind.

He had no idea what Mania's powers were, but the random eye-tracking and muttering under her breath *really* reminded him of Kristin's powers when she was alive. If one person had the ability to see the dead, how crazy was he to think there could be another?

He took a moment to reflect on the thought and couldn't help but sigh. Maybe he *should* go home.

Not that Techno would be much help getting him to calm down. There had been something off about him since he was hit with the synthetic trigger. Something Phil didn't want to think about, because if he was right about *that* then they would have a whole other mess on their hands.

But apparently, the universe wasn't quite done with them yet.

Only a few minutes after Aegis finished patching up Reaper a whole commotion of shouting and screaming started up on the other side of the hall's double doors.

Mania's head suddenly shot up, but she wasn't looking toward the door. Phil watched from the corner of his eye as her gaze once again locked on empty space in the middle of the hall before all the colour drained from her face again.

"No, no, no, no, no, no, *no!*" her quiet muttering jumped to a shout as the bracelet fell from her hands, stray beads bouncing across the dirty tiles with hardly a sound.

One second she was sitting and the next she was throwing open the doors, giving the rest of them a small glimpse at a gruesome scene beyond.

Phil was quick on her heels, getting to the doors before they were able to swing closed again and froze as his brain registered what he was looking at.

There were two bloodied figures laid out in the middle of the floor while a handful of nurses argued and scrambled around them.

The figure in a familiar red coat was none other than Captain Sparklez, writhing in pain as he clutched at his throat with blood-stained hands. His mouth was open in a silent scream of agony and his sunglasses were missing, revealing how tight he had his eyes screwed shut.

Every single person in scrubs was focused on Sparklez, trying their best to stop him from moving while attempting to do anything to stop the excessive bleeding from his neck.

The other figure was completely motionless where she was propped up on her knees by the huge, gleaming netherite spear through her chest.

Mania was the only person near her, already sobbing as she gently lifted the other girl's head, cradling her face like she would break if Mania moved too fast.

There was no doubt that the other girl was dead, not with the perfect placement of the spear through her heart or the once white jumpsuit stained dark red with blood.

There was also no doubt that the dead girl was an intern, and certainly, a friend of the other kids present, not with the way Mania cried and the horrified gasps and cries from the boys behind Phil.

Phil spread out his wings to block their view of the scene, as he should have done from the beginning.

He glanced back over his shoulder. "Stay here and don't look anymore, you shouldn't be seeing this," he said, fixing Aegis and Reaper with a firm look.

He was met by two very panicked faces in return, though Aegis at least had the sense to put a hand on Reaper's shoulder to drag him back.

"I'll watch them," Tycoon said, taking a step back from the doorway, his own face gone pale. "You go get her."

Phil nodded and stepped away from the doors but didn't drop his wings until he was sure they were firmly closed behind him.

More nurses and doctors poured into the hall and focused their efforts on Sparklez as Phil approached Mania. A few of them look like they were about to check on the girls but were either pulled away by someone else barking orders at them or backed off after Tempest gave them a slow shake of his head.

He couldn't make out what the intern was muttering over the sounds of everyone rushing to save Sparklez until he crouched next to her and realized he could hear *two* voices.

"—said theres a way to bring people back!" Mania was sobbing. " *Please* you have to—"

I can't, Aimsey, answered the second voice that made Phil's heart stutter. *That power no longer rests in my hands and even if it did, I can't be the one to use it.*

Mania's face crumpled as she slowly lowered the dead girl's head again. One of her hands ghosted over the top of the dead girl's hair, lifting off before it brushed over the orange and brown cat ears poking through the mess of dark waves.

The crushed expression abruptly shifted to one of anger while Phil remained frozen, pinned in place by just the sound of Kristin's voice.

"If you don't have the power then tell me who does!" she hissed, loud enough to convey her frustration but still too quiet to draw attention. "She doesn't deserve this, if there's a way for me to fix this then *tell me how!*"

Phil blinked and when his eyes opened he could see the scuffed kneepads of Kristin's vigilante gear beyond the dead girl's head. He didn't take his eyes off of Mania though.

I'm sorry kiddo, I really am. But I won't tell you who has the book. If I do, I have the feeling that I'll just end up with even more dead kids on my hands.

"That's *bull* —"

"Mania," Phil said firmly, cutting her off.

The intern looked up with a blazing fury in her eyes. "I'm *not* leaving her," she spat.

Something about the way she said it gave Phil the impression she was talking to both him and Death.

"You are," he said firmly. "I might not be able to see or hear her right now, but I have the feeling she's begging you to drop it too."

At that, the girl gave him an alarmed look. "What—"

"Sometimes things like this are just out of our hands," he continued, trying to make his tone softer. "We all lose people we care about eventually, *especially* in this industry."

"But I can find a way to bring her back—"

No you can't, Kristin said firmly. *I won't let you anywhere near that book. You're way too young for that level of involvement in this world, and I will step in if you force my hand.*

A book, huh? That wasn't something Phil wanted to have to think about the implications of right now.

Phil still refused to look up at Kristin, keeping his eyes locked on Mania. "You won't bring her back," he said, knowing it was probably the truth. "Even if there were a way it's not something you want to get mixed up in. I know this hurts, and it's a lot to process, but your friend is gone. So just let her go, and come with me so the doctors can do their jobs."

"No!" she shouted this time. "There has to be a way to *fix* this! I'm not just going to walk away when I *know* —"

"Tempest we need to clear the area," one of the doctors said with a gentle touch to his shoulder while the intern continued to rant and argue.

Phil nodded to the doctor and sighed, leaning back onto the balls of his feet and resting his arms on his knees, wings spread slightly for balance.

"Mania, the doctors need us to move—"

"I'm not leaving her!" she sobbed again, her eyes starting to cloud over with hysteria.

She's not listening anymore angel, Kristin said softly, now directly addressing him. *Just move her, it's for the best.*

At least they could agree on that much.

He sighed again as he leaned in towards the sobbing intern. "Sorry 'bout this mate," he huffed, wrapping an arm around her waist and hauling her off the ground as he stood.

She wordlessly screamed, writhing and struggling in his arms as he adjusted in a way so that he was the only one getting kicked as he dragged her back towards the doors to the other hall.

Kristin turned to watch them go, completely unseen by the swarming team of doctors trying to clear enough space to move Sparklez safely. Her dark eyes locked on Phil's for a moment too long before she vanished between one blink and the next.

The second the doors closed behind them Mania managed to land an intentional kidney hit that made Phil drop her with a grunt of pain. She made it all of three steps back towards the door before Aegis dragged her back into a crushing bear hug.

"*Crumb*—" she sobbed, voice cracking with every syllable.

"I know," Aegis nearly whispered, tucking her head into his shoulder. "I saw, I know."

Suddenly feeling like an intruder, Phil looked away, only for his gaze to land on Reaper a bit further down the hall.

He had the half-finished bracelet resting in one hand while the other pulled back the jacket's sleeve to reveal a matching red, black and white bracelet on his own wrist.

Something twisted in Phil's chest, somehow making his already aching heart burn worse.

He glanced back at the other interns to find Aegis's eyes locked on Reaper, his own hands fiddling with a gold and white bracelet on his wrist against Mania's back.

A half-finished friendship bracelet for a dead girl.

His eyes stung as he absently thumbed over his bare ring finger. The wedding band was still on a chain on his nightstand at home.

"It was Sch- *Schlatt!*" Mania sobbed into Aegis's shoulder. "They— they were trying to save Tub— the— the kid that— that he used to make *Trigger*."

Phil started, sharing an alarmed look with Scar. Neither of them had been back long enough to work on the Trigger case, but Phil knew enough to know that *nobody* knew who Schlatt used to make the stuff. If Mania had a way of finding out or if Captain Sparklez lived—

"I'm gonna fucking *kill* 'im," Reaper hissed, hand tightening around the orange and white bracelet in his hand. "I'm— I'm gonna—"

“Do nothing and let the real heroes handle this before someone else gets caught in the crossfire,” Phil cut him off firmly. He hesitated for a moment before continuing in a softer tone. “I think the last thing any of you want right now is more dead friends.”

He could feel the heat from Reaper’s glare, but the intern made no move to argue.

“I’ll tell you everything,” Mania said suddenly, her voice still shaking. Phil glanced back to find her still tucked in Aegis’s arms, but with her eyes locked on him. “I’ll use my powers to find every last scrap of information I can on Schlatt’s operation, but with one condition.”

The dark glint in the girl’s eyes made him hesitate. Gods knew that people did terrible things when consumed by grief, nothing good came from that immediate look of cruelty on such a young face.

“What’s the condition?” he asked eventually. Maybe he didn’t mind the possibility of dark intentions as much as he should have. Maybe Schlatt deserved it.

“I want you to make sure he fucking *pays* for it,” she snarled, eyes shining bright with more unshed tears.

Well, now who was he to say no to that?

Sharp pain spiked behind Wilbur’s eyes as he woke, making him abruptly regret his entire existence.

He had woken up hungover many times in his life, it came with the territory when one of your unhealthy coping mechanisms in high school was drinking and partying. This, however, was taking the top spot for the worst morning yet.

Before he even opened his eyes, he could feel his head swimming in dizzying circles that made him want nothing more than to pass out again.

It took him a minute to get his bearings, registering that he was in a bed, in *pyjamas* surprisingly, and felt relatively clean. He risked opening his eyes and immediately regretted it as the ceiling fan seemed to spin despite being turned off.

He groaned, squeezing his eyes shut and trying to retrace his steps over the past, what, day? Two? Either way, he had no idea how he got back to his own apartment.

He had... he had that argument with Techno after he was discharged from the hospital. Then he went back to his apartment and broke out half a bottle of wine Niki had left last time they had a dinner party at Wilbur’s place. Then the bottle was empty but it wasn’t *enough* —

The sound of footsteps and cursing from beyond his bedroom door drew him out of his jumbled thoughts. Was there someone else *here*? But— why? *Who*?

That question was quickly answered as the footsteps got louder and the bedroom door swung open, hitting the wall with a loud bang that made Wilbur’s head spin. He groaned miserably

as he rolled onto his side, hoping to get a better look at the door when he could stand to open his eyes again.

“I swear to fucking Prime man if you throw up again I’m just gonna fucking leave you to choke on it,” an angry voice grumbled, followed by the muffled sounds of socked feet on the hardwood floor. “I’m *so* fucking over this shit, I’m literally about to just fucking call Tech—”

“*Tommy?*” Wilbur groaned in confusion, cracking his eyes open to find a blurry mess of blond hair and a blue sweater that was *definitely* one of Wilbur’s.

They stared at each other for a long moment as Wilbur’s vision slowly started to clear, revealing that it was, in fact, Tommy, standing in the middle of his bedroom. In his apartment. That Wilbur had never taken him to before.

Tommy, who ran away and left some goodbye notes that caused Wilbur to spiral so bad that he went on the first black-out bender since he was a teenager.

“Hey dickhead, I see you’re feeling better,” Tommy huffed, looking somewhere between pissed and about to bolt out the door. “‘Bout fuckin’ *time*. ”

Wilbur stared at him in utter disbelief for another long minute.

“What the *fuck?*”

Chapter End Notes

insert evil laughter here

Oh yeah, it's all coming together.

Sorry about introducing so many characters at once but they were holding me at gunpoint demanding to be written. Also fair warning next chapter won't be completely linear with the rest so far, it'll jump back and forth through the days Tommy was gone.

Also sorry about that hiatus, I was finishing up school and got pretty burnt out from working on so many big projects at once. It's probably gonna be slow for a bit but I'm committed to finishing this fic I promise.

Anyway! I now have a very cool [Discord Server](#) that has places to rant about this fic and also just hang out with some cool people over there.

If you've made it this far make sure to leave kudos and a comment! I always love to hear what people are thinking about new developments even if it's just incoherent screaming

<3

Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Wilbur wakes up in the hospital after Tommy's disappearance.

Tommy deals with the consequences of his choices.

Chapter Notes

Hey, hey, hey! Long time no see!

Just to clarify this isn't totally linear, so the chapter starts from Wilbur's pov a few days earlier than where the last chapter left off and catches up to the same day with Tommy's.

Anyway, I'm very excited to finally have this chapter done, I rewrote it from scratch three times trying to get it right and I'm pretty happy with how it turned out. While I don't recommend getting Covid, you can thank my weak immune system for all the time I had to finish this and the next three chapters.

Thank you to all you wonderful readers that have stuck around for this slow period, your comments and kudos give me life <3.

And as always, thank you to my wonderful beta reader <3

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur hadn't said a word to Phil or Techno since waking up from the sedatives the nurses gave him, too consumed by grief and guilt to tell them what was going through his head.

Tommy told him. He *told* Wilbur that he wasn't okay and Wilbur had tried his best to help. He tried to spend all his free time with the kid, to make him more comfortable and confident in his place with their little screwed up family. He tried to be the support he never had at Tommy's age because he thought it would be enough to help.

Wilbur should have told someone. He should have broken the promise of discrepancy that he made after their chat in the laundry room and *told someone* that Tommy was struggling. If Tommy had been getting real help this whole time, had been making actual progress instead of half assed bonding with them, then maybe this wouldn't be happening.

Wilbur wasn't even sure if there was any fixing it at this point.

"Did you ever just wish it would all end?" Tommy asked, his blue eyes locked on the empty wall across from them.

Wilbur ignored the way the question made the scars on his wrists burn and his mouth run dry. It had been a while since he allowed himself to think of phrases like that for long.

"What do you mean by that, Tommy?" He asked despite knowing damn well what the exhausted teen meant.

Though Tommy didn't know it, Wilbur had seen him at the hospital, had seen the resigned defeat in every line of his body as he begged Whisper for one last chance while expecting nothing to change. The hopelessness of someone who had already given up on the world helping him.

"You know what I mean," Tommy nearly whispered, as though reading Wilbur's thoughts.

Tommy... Tommy might not even be alive to try and help anymore. Not if those notes meant what Wilbur thought they might.

Healing wasn't linear. Suicidal kids didn't just magically stop considering the possibility without time and help, neither of which Tommy had enough of.

He couldn't help but think of Tommy's note to him whenever he closed his eyes, like the letters were burned into the back of his eyelids.

Wilbur,

You might be a lying dickhead sometimes, but you're also my brother.

I'm sorry I never worked up the courage to tell you.

Maybe if Wilbur had the courage to say it first, things would be different. His first time thinking of Tommy as a brother wouldn't have been as he stared death in the face in a half-crushed car and Tommy's first time calling him brother would have been on a goodbye sticky note.

What if they had just told him? They had already passed that three-month mark where Tommy's emergency placement should have ended. There was no denying he was staying, so what if they had told him who they were?

Would he have trusted them enough to ask for help? Would it have chased him away faster?

That's all the last couple days had been for him, a series of *what if? What if? What if?* With no answers in sight.

A light knock on the door drew him from his thoughts.

He looked up to see Techno standing in the doorway with one of Wilbur's gym bags over his shoulder. His brother was staring at him with thinly veiled concern for a moment before his mouth twisted in a slight frown.

"You ready to go?" he asked eventually, stepping into the room and dropping the bag at the foot of Wilbur's bed. He hesitated a moment before taking a seat on the edge next to it.

Wilbur stared down at the bag and shrugged. He was never one to deny an early escape from the crisp sheets and smell of antiseptic that came with hospitals, but part of him didn't want to leave. It felt like accepting that Tommy wasn't coming back, like giving up on the fleeting hope that he could walk back through the door at any second.

Techno sighed, lightly smoothing a hand over the flyaways that had escaped from his messy bun. "Wilbur...I know you're worried about Tommy, but we're not gonna be able to fix this Trigger problem without you."

"It's my fault," Wilbur blurted suddenly, speaking for the first time in days.

Techno frowned again. "What?"

"It's my fault Tommy...it's my fault. He— after the mall incident he— he told me he was depressed and I...I thought being there for him would be enough." He swallowed around the sudden tightness in his throat. "I should have told Phil. If— he probably would have gotten so bad if he had help since the beginning. It's my fault."

The following silence felt more damning than he thought it would. *Why* would he tell Techno first? What else was he expecting? Sympathy? Forgiveness?

"Wilbur," Techno said in an unreadable tone.

Wilbur couldn't make himself look up.

"Wilbur, can you just look at me for five seconds."

Wilbur sighed. He really did this to himself, didn't he?

He looked up to find Techno watching him with an unreadable look on his face. The expression reminded him of his brother's usual look of concern, but the whole expression was different with his new piglin features.

Techno sighed this time. "Look, it didn't take a genius to notice the kid was depressed. We were all just trying to give him space, so it is *not* your fault."

"But—" Wilbur started to argue weakly, only to be cut off.

"We're *also* pretty sure that's not the reason he left," Techno continued, looking away with a somewhat pinched expression. "Or, at least, not the only reason."

Wilbur stared at him for a long moment, hating how hard it was to read Techno now.

Even having known his brother for most of their memorable lives, he could be hard to read on a good day. Now it was practically impossible with the way the set of his jaw had changed to accommodate the small tusks that pulled at his lips. He couldn't read any of the minute facial expressions and it was just as hard to track his body language with his suddenly bulkier frame, making him constantly look uncomfortable in his own skin.

Still, he shoved those thoughts back in favour of the question at hand. If Tommy didn't run just because of his personal struggles, then what else was there?

"Techno, what are you talking about?" he asked slowly, caught between too many racing thoughts to really know how to feel about the question. Should he be worried? Scared? Angry? What was even going on here?

Techno's jaw clenched slightly before he spoke. "A few weeks ago, I met a rogue that warned me to keep an eye on Tommy. He said there might be people looking for him, or maybe even hunting him, I'm not sure. At the time I kind of brushed it off because the rogue seemed to be missin' a few screws but I told Phil to keep a lookout and it just...never really came up again."

Wilbur blinked as the information processed.

Something curled uncomfortably in his gut as memories started to surface.

After the night Tommy and Ranboo snuck out, something had been different. It would be a stretch to say that Tommy was ever fully relaxed, but he was definitely far tenser than before. Constantly looking out the windows for a second too long, watching every car and dark corner with searching eyes the few times they went out, going incredibly still at the sound of footsteps until he could see or hear who it was.

So many things Wilbur chalked up to system trauma when he used to do the same things himself.

"What the fuck, Techno," Wilbur found himself nearly growling as his racing mind finally snagged on one emotion.

Techno tilted his head back towards Wilbur and grimaced slightly. "I haven't even finished yet," he rumbled, shifting slightly where he sat.

"I don't fucking— why wouldn't you guys tell me! Someone was out there after Tommy this whole time and neither of you thought it would be worth *mentioning* to me? First you don't tell me about his healing rebound and then this?!"

"Wilbur—"

Something in his chest ached as he finally snapped.

"Don't you fucking *Wilbur* me, dickhead! You barely fucking know the kid! *I've* been the one spending every free moment with Tommy and you hardly even spoke to him until like two

weeks ago! Yet somehow *I'm* the one always out of the loop on the Tommy train? Am *I* not trustworthy enough to even *know* when the person I'm hanging out with twenty-four-seven is in *danger*? I am just as much of a fucking licensed hero as you! Phil doesn't even have his license anymore! Why— what the *fuck*!" he cried, smacking his hands against the thin hospital bed as he swung his legs over the edge to stand.

He turned to glare at Techno just in time to see the other roll his eyes like he thought *Wilbur* was the problem here.

"It's— okay it sounds kinda bad when you say it like *that*," Techno started in an infuriatingly calm tone. "You'd just been under a lot of stress with hero work, I didn't want to tell you just in case it turned out to be nothing and Phil agreed. We weren't, like, trying to exclude you, we just wanted to avoid giving you more things to stress over."

Wilbur barked out a sharp laugh. "And look where that's gotten us!" he exclaimed, throwing his arms out to the sides with his palms up. "Tommy's fucking *gone* and I have absolutely no fucking clue why, so I've been blaming myself for days when I really should have been blaming *you*."

Techno stayed seated on the edge of the bed while Wilbur loomed over him with a challenging glare. Techno's nose twitched slightly in a way it never did before his hybrid transformation.

"Is that so?" he said, rising to Wilbur's bait.

Wilbur smiled. "Yeah, it sure is," he hissed, his grin dangerously close to bared teeth. "Did it ever occur to you, maybe for even a fleeting second, that *I* might actually be helpful in this situation? That, oh I don't know, *I* was once hunted down and might know the signs? That I might have the experience to *tell* if it was a real problem or not?"

Techno stared him down with an impressive amount of confidence for a man that was making no move to answer.

Wilbur scoffed. "I'm not blind, Techno. You have been treating me with fucking kid gloves for months, so don't tell me that you just *didn't want to stress me out*. What logical and beneficial reason is there for keeping me in the dark about the kid that I've been spending all my time looking out for? That I know and understand better than you and Phil *combined*. The kid that you don't even *like*," he hissed, jamming a finger to Techno's chest to emphasize his point.

His brother slowly pushed to his feet, newly black and white eyes never breaking contact as he forced Wilbur back a few steps.

"First of all, I do like Tommy, I just don't trust him," Techno said, crossing his arms in an infuriatingly calm manner that made Wilbur feel as though he was being talked down to.

"He's a fucking *child* you cagey mother—"

“A child who can spar at the same level as any affiliate hero,” Techno cut in. “A child covered in scars who we know nothing about, who never talks about his past or himself—”

“He’s a lifetime foster kid! Of course, he not going to talk about—”

“And a child who knows more about *Trigger* than he’s letting on, he ran at the first sign that I knew anything about it—”

“What the *hell* are you talking about—”

“I was trying to protect *you!*” Techno snapped suddenly, making Wilbur flinch back.

“Tommy was a disaster waiting to happen and I didn’t want to see you get caught up in it before he even crashed! And you’re right, maybe I have been treatin’ you with kid gloves, I’m just so damn *tired* of watching you burn yourself out and almost getting yourself *killed*. Maybe if you actually proved you were capable of getting your shit together enough to actually handle your *job* —”

Wilbur *laughed* as he took another step back, because the only other option was to break down in tears and he fucking *refused* to prove Techno’s point any further.

“You and Dream must be getting along *really* well these days for you to be spouting that shit to my *face*,” he laughed more than a little manically.

The look of startled confusion on Techno’s face morphed into an uncomfortable grimace. “I didn’t mean it like that,” he huffed, the fire in his eyes already starting to die down to a simmer.

“Oh I’m *sure* that’s not what you meant,” he spat back. “You definitely don’t agree with literally everyone that knows me, you’re not one of the dozens of people that whispered behind my back for *years* about how I’m not cut out to be a hero, that I’ll never make it. Right? You’ve *never* said that to me before,” he said, sarcasm dripping like poison off his tongue.

“Wilbur that’s not what I *meant*,” Techno stressed again, his tone harsh with frustration.

“Yes, it is,” Wilbur stated, a cold calmness falling over him as he stepped forward to lean into Techno’s space again.

“Wil—”

“The worst part is that you’re right,” he said dully. “I never *wanted* to be a fucking hero in the first place, I just didn’t want to live in a glorified prison for the rest of my life. But unless I *magically* find a way to permanently get rid of my stupid fucking powers, this is the life I’m stuck with. So it would’ve been *nice* to have my own *brother* treat me with enough respect to at least spare my dignity. Or to just *pretend* like I’m just as capable as the rest of you when I’m in the room.”

He stared Techno down. Challenging him— *begging* him— to retort. To give Wilbur a real reason to hate him, maybe a reason to *hit* him, just fucking *anything* but the crushing silence

of his final statement.

It took less than ten seconds for Techno to fold. He looked away with regret flashing in his eyes as his shoulders slumped slightly.

Wilbur scoffed. “Well, who would have guessed that the *Blood God* was a fucking coward on top of everything else,” he huffed, twisting the knife so much deeper than the situation called for.

Phil would be livid to hear Wilbur throwing that kind of shit at his brother. Would have lectured him and grilled him and made him apologize for being such a dick for no reason.

Techno just punched him in the face.

The hit sent Wilbur reeling back, only catching himself from falling on the empty bed behind him. The strength behind it was unexpected but Wilbur got the impression Techno had still held back, considering how much his muscles shook under an invisible strain.

The pain that sparked in his jaw and teeth only made him grin as he suddenly felt more alive than he had in days.

A small voice in the back of his head told him that was a bad thing, that he was falling back into an unhealthy headspace.

Luckily for him, the thrum of his powers activating was loud enough to drown that voice out.

“Move,” he commanded, righting himself to step back towards the bag still on the other bed.

Techno snarled, eyes clouding over as he fought against the order. Under most circumstances Techno was strong enough to break out of such direct commands, his own willpower much stronger than Wilbur’s, considering he rarely had the drive to keep his brother there.

But somehow, despite how pissed Techno obviously was, his struggling felt like a weak pull on a fishing line in the back of Wilbur’s mind. At this rate, Techno would pass out from the strain of resisting before he broke free.

Wilbur’s stomach twisted uncomfortably at the sight of his brother jerkily stumbling to the side, his hands coming up to tangle in his messy pink hair.

“Get out of my head,” Techno snarled, his voice sounding almost painfully raw. His eyes screwed shut tight as his fingers tightened on his hair until his knuckles turned white.

Wilbur watched with a detached sense of apathy as he stepped forward to retrieve the bag off the foot of the bed. He unzipped it to the sound of Techno’s breathing growing heavier despite Wilbur having already cut off his power’s control. The bag had a change of Wilbur’s clothes in it, alongside his phone and keys in a plastic evidence bag, probably fished up from the bay.

The little part of him that wanted to puke reared his head when he turned back to meet Techno’s white pupils and dark sclera. He hated that they were Techno’s eyes but he didn’t

know them, couldn't read them as well.

He was pretty sure Techno was pissed. But he ignored the part of him that could read the hesitance. The *fear*.

Everyone was fine with Wilbur until they were reminded of what he was. On paper Techno was the scarier one, taking away energy to make the body weaker.

In reality, there was nothing worse than losing control in your own mind.

"Who's looking for Tommy then?" he said in a conversational tone, despite having just fucked up Techno's head for no reason. "You said it never came up again but I'm obviously missing something if you're bringing it up now."

Techno swallowed, still breathing hard as he tried to stand up straighter. "Wilbur, what are you doing?"

"Asking you a question, obviously," he said, rolling his eyes. "You were going to tell me anyway, right? All the shit you and Phil have been hiding from me about Tommy?"

They stared each other down for a long moment, Wilbur choosing to ignore the foggy look in Techno's eyes.

"Look, I get that you're upset, I kinda deserve that," Techno admitted after a beat, "but that was too far and you know it."

There was a time in Wilbur's life when using his powers to be unnecessarily cruel was his greatest fear, he knew that, but that time had long passed. Whisper had done one too many interrogations that ended with the other guy in the hospital to pretend like he was a good person anymore.

"So? What are you going to do, call dad and tell on me? Tell me I'm a bad person?" He scoffed. "Good people end up in facilities or dead, Tech. I gave up on being a good person a long time ago but that doesn't mean I'm gonna sit by and do nothing to help Tommy, so ***answer my question.***"

This time Techno didn't even fight the command, answering of his own free will to avoid the painful consequences of resisting Wilbur's powers.

"When Tommy went out to get the snacks, some guy with a knife dragged him into a bathroom for about five minutes. We don't know for sure, but I think the guy is a mercenary called The Handler who Refractz was supposed to be tracking. The main problem with *that* is that Punz has been missing for weeks and his casefiles still had The Handler linked to three different criminal organizations, so we have no idea who he was working for and still have no leads on why they would want Tommy," Techno grit out with a heated glare.

"The other problem is that the police have already basically dropped the case to a runaway foster kid because we don't have any concrete evidence," he continued, "so it's gonna take an annoying amount of effort to get that info on the right desk and get the cops back into the

search. As it stands only some of the affiliate heroes at our agency and Punz's know about The Handler theory, so at this moment nothing has changed."

Wilbur frowned as he shrugged the bag onto his shoulder. "Nothing has changed from what?"

Techno worked his jaw for a moment before replying. "We don't know who the mercenary works for, why he'd be interested in Tommy *or* where Tommy might be," he explained. "We're still flying blind here and quite frankly have no resources to continue the search. There are too many big players moving in the city to devote everything to finding one missing kid who *ran away*."

They glared at each other in silence once more, the words hanging heavy in the air between them. This time it was Wilbur that broke first.

"Well, I'll be on my way out then," he said evenly, turning for the door. "Don't bother coming after me, I'll just make you fuck off."

"Your license is still suspended until you get approved medically and by your agency," Techno called after him. "There's no way in hell Phil's gonna approve you after he hears about this."

Wilbur paused in the doorway, turning to look back over his shoulder with a frown. "Phil?"

"He applied to get his license renewed yesterday," Techno said. "He's the final say and he's not gonna let you back in the field like this. You can't help search for Tommy if you just run off."

Wilbur couldn't help but snort and shake his head. "Hero licenses are overrated, I can get more done without the paperwork. Besides, who's gonna stop me? You?"

Techno frowned at him. "You can't help him if you're in jail or worse, Wil."

Wilbur's lips twitched into a grim smile. "I may be a shit hero Tech, but we both know I'd make a fucking *fantastic* rogue." When Techno made no move to reply Wilbur couldn't help but grin a little wider. "You should go home, you look tired," he teased.

"Screw you," Techno spat. "If you're gonna leave then just *go* already."

Wilbur walked out the door without another word.

Of course, it was only a few hours before the texts started to roll in, first from Phil, then from Niki, Fundy, Quackity, Jack Manifold and even *George* of all people. They were mostly concerned, hearing that he got into a fight with Techno and reminding Wilbur he could always talk to them. Even the texts from Phil were vague enough that Wilbur had to assume Techno didn't share any of the greater details of their fight.

That was what made the guilt finally start to settle in.

Techno was right, Wilbur had absolutely gone too far. Techno had every right to tell the entire world what Wilbur had done, using his powers just to be a dick and dragging up Techno's

past just to hurt the other man. But he hadn't, he just told some people they got into a fight and asked if they could check on him.

Techno was still being a good brother even when Wilbur didn't even try to be a good person to him.

At first he tried to ignore it by throwing himself into the search for Tommy, to try and make sure his cruelty towards his brother at least had some positive results. But even operating rogue, no hero gear or name, he was turning up empty handed.

Every useful contact he tried to go to was MIA and according to the contacts he *could* find, many of those missing vigilantes and rogues were caught up in personal matters and made a point to erase their trails before they vanished.

Either way, it became increasingly obvious that nobody knew where Tommy was, or who the handler was working for.

A day after he left the hospital and found another night of searching with no results, he found himself drawn to the half-empty bottle of wine in the back of his cupboards.

His mind flashed with so many memories of nights of drinking gone wrong, of more hospital visits and mornings at school missing first class bent over the toilet as his head swam miserably. But it also remembered the fun times, the carefree feeling that came with just enough drinks at dinner to let the anxiety fade and his worries left for another day.

One glass of wine couldn't hurt, Wilbur had been completely fine any time he joined his friends for after patrol drinks in the last few years. He knew his limits.

He knew his limits, which meant that he knew that one glass wouldn't be enough to make him tipsy. That he'd definitely need the second glass after.

But of course, tipsy wasn't enough to completely relax when someone completely screwed over his relationship with one brother and was miserably failing to find the other.

Before he knew it the bottle was empty and he barely felt a thing.

He glanced at the clock to check the time.

He hadn't turned in his search for the night until the sun was already rising and hadn't managed to get home until well into the morning.

How early did the nearest bar open?

"What the *fuck*?" Wilbur groaned, his voice cracking pitifully in the middle.

Tommy couldn't help but grimace now that he was faced with the consequences of his actions.

He hadn't meant to stay, honestly. His original plan had just been to dump Wilbur in his apartment, let the poor bastard sleep it off and pray that he forgot Tommy was the one that took him home.

He made it through the first part just fine, hauling Wilbur through the empty apartment building lobby and to the elevator without running into anybody else. Wilbur even managed to tell him the right floor and apartment number before they made it there so getting inside was no problem.

The problem started when Tommy dumped his brother on the bed in the master bedroom and went to get a glass of water on his way out. Maybe even steal something from the fridge if there was anything good.

In a moment of weakness, he convinced himself that staying just long enough to heat up the leftover Chinese food wouldn't hurt. He wouldn't even have to take off his boots, just eat and run.

Yet, after fully hydrating and finishing his meal, he foolishly went back to check on Wilbur one last time before leaving for real.

Only he found the man now completely unconscious and lying in a puddle of his own vomit still on top of the blankets.

Tommy might have been a little selfish and rude lately, but he wasn't *that* much of a dick. So, despite knowing that the sooner he left the safer they'd all be, he dropped his gear bag, took off his borrowed jacket and got to work cleaning up.

By the time he got the bed clean, the sheets changed and put in the washer, and Wilbur cleaned up and changed into fresh clothes, the rain seemed to have no end in sight. After days on the run with minimal amounts of sleep or medical attention, every untreated injury on Tommy's body began to beg for his attention.

What's another hour gonna do? He reasoned to himself, ducking into the bathroom to search for a first aid kit.

The next thing he knew, Tommy woke up shivering on the couch, his own grimy shirt still on the floor where he discarded it to patch up a nasty cut on the back of his shoulder. He sat up and squinted through the dim light into the kitchen, looking at the clock on the stove.

2:42

Tommy frowned and glanced out the huge wall of windows, taking in the massive storm still coming down outside. It was probably 2:42 PM based on the number of car lights visible on the roads. Looking at the sky was hardly a help due to how dark the clouds were.

Tommy sighed at the empty apartment. He *really* needed to leave.

He glanced down at his ruined shirt still on the floor next to the first aid kit.

He really needed to do laundry, too.

He glanced back at the kitchen.

2:45

Well, if they hadn't found him by now it meant the storm was probably slowing them down. He could probably scrape up another couple of hours before it *really* became an issue.

Hopefully.

Tommy grunted in pain as he rolled off the couch and snatched up the shirt, making his way towards the small laundry room on the other side of the apartment.

But of course, no matter how many times he reminded himself that staying here just put Wilbur in more danger, put *everyone* in more danger, something else always seemed like a good enough reason to stay just a little bit longer.

Yet standing here, looking Wilbur in the eye as he groggily came back to his senses, was the first real reason his brain could accept it as a really *great* time to leave.

This conversation could go dozens of ways and none of them ended with everyone going home safe and happy. At best they would grudgingly talk it out and Tommy would sneak out the second Wilbur turned his back, at worst Wilbur could convince Tommy to stay so long that someone finally caught on and came to kill Wil and take Tommy to Schlatt.

Or maybe Wilbur would be so pissed at him for running off that he'd just kick Tommy out, now that he was awake. In all honesty that was probably the ideal situation, as much as it would hurt Tommy. It would be easier to stay away if they hated him more than he loved them.

Tommy should have been long gone by now.

"Well, nice to see you awake I guess," he said awkwardly, inching back towards the bedroom door again. "I, uh, I've kinda got other places to be but uh—" he laughed weakly. "I don't know, make better life choices next time," he said, waving over his shoulder and he made a break for the door.

His clothes had long since been folded and stuffed into his bag, waiting next to his boots and gear bag next to the door. Wilbur had so many damn sweaters that wasn't like he'd miss the one Tommy—

"*T-Tommy wait!*" Wilbur's muffled cry echoed through the quiet apartment, quickly followed by a heavy thump and absolute silence.

Tommy froze in front of the door, listening for any sounds of movement coming from the bedroom and frowned when he heard nothing.

Did Wilbur fall out of the bed and hurt himself? Did he stand up too fast and pass out?

Just as two sides of Tommy—the one that wanted nothing more than to run back to his family and beg for forgiveness and help, versus the one that *knew* he needed to leave, that

wanted to kill the mercenary and find a way out of the country forever— started to war with each other, a small sound broke through the silence.

“Fuck —” Wilbur hissed, his voice cracking into a heart wrenching sob.

A harsh thud followed by the sound of clattering made Tommy flinch lightly where his hand hovered over the door handle.

Leave, leave, leave, you need to leave—

“I’m sorry —” Wilbur sobbed to his empty bedroom. *“I’m so sorry, please —”*

Tommy had never heard Wilbur cry before. He was usually so lively, so chatty and downright annoying sometimes but always knew Tommy’s real boundaries. The absolute desperation and anguish sounded so wrong in his voice.

It wasn’t supposed to go like this. Tommy had been too busy imagining what happy little futures he could have with this family to even dwell on the possible bad endings.

They were supposed to be hosting a Thanksgiving dinner for the Watson family’s extended friends in five days, not— not whatever *this* was.

His knuckles ached from how hard his first were clenched, making his arms shake at his sides.

“You don’t want to drag everyone down, or you want to keep them safe? Which one?”
Drista’s words echoed in his mind.

Tommy searched for the dying embers of the rage that had driven him for the last few days, for the horrible, sickening fear he was trying to burn away by finding the main source and making sure they couldn’t hurt anybody else again.

Wilbur’s sobs reached his ears once more and it felt like a bucket of ice cold water doused out the last coals of that fire in his chest.

If Tommy stayed, they’d all die.

But if Tommy left now—

“The way you’re going, isn’t going to end well for anyone.”

Tommy was *so fucking tired*.

His ears were ringing so much that he hardly registered the sound of his gear bag hitting the floor, nor the loud thumping of his untied combat boots across the hardwood floors.

He froze in the doorway, breath stuttering at the sight of Wilbur curled up against the edge of the bed and bedside table, the lamp and clock from the table on the ground next to him.

Wilbur's head jerked up at the sound of Tommy coming to a stop at the door. His soft brown eyes were puffy and bloodshot, both from crying and his lingering hangover. The man's shoulders rose and fell shakily with his uneven breaths and the two stared at each other, unmoving.

To Tommy, it felt like the whole world around them had frozen, the only sounds breaking through the cloud of static in his mind were both of their shaking, uncertain breaths in the quiet space between them.

After what felt like centuries but couldn't have been more than minutes, Wilbur was suddenly on his feet and between one breath and the next, Tommy threw himself into his brother's arms. The arms around him were as unyielding as metal bands while his own grip on the back of Wilbur's t-shirt felt as though he might tear straight through the fabric.

Wilbur sobbed into Tommy's hair as he buried his face in Wilbur's shoulder. The arms around him tightened so much it was nearly hard to breathe, but Tommy couldn't imagine wanting to be anywhere else at that moment.

"Tommy," Wilbur breathed, making Tommy's own grip on the man tighten. "Gods Tommy, *why* —"

"I need to *go* Wil," Tommy cut him off with a whine in his voice. "I— I can't *stay*," he said, despite making no moves to escape their embrace.

Regardless, Wilbur's arms tightened even further. "*No*," he rasped. "No please, don't— don't disappear again, *please*. I can't— Tommy you have to tell me what's going on. I can help you but I just—"

"You can't help Wilbur," Tommy argued, shaking his head where it still rested on his shoulder. "You're— I *can't* stay. It'll only put you in more danger."

The arms around him loosened ever so slightly yet Tommy still made no move to pull away.

"More danger?" Wilbur repeated, tone laced with confusion. "More than— Tommy, what are you talking about?"

"I can't tell you," Tommy nearly whispered, guilt making his stomach churn uncomfortably.

Wilbur paused for a beat before letting out a shuddering breath. "Toms if I'm in danger then I've got a right to *know*, don't I? I— gods I'm so tired of all this *lying* —"

Tommy couldn't help the abrupt laughter that burst past his filter as he finally raised his head slightly. Now *that* was fucking rich. An ugly bitterness reared its head, reminding him of the danger of what went unsaid in his last conversation with Techno, the bluntness with which Phil withheld the truth from him.

The cowardice of Wilbur repeating a caught lie over and over.

Could Tommy even handle the answer at this point?

“Oh, *you’re* tired of the lying?” he laughed. “How the fuck do you think *I* feel mister “investigative journalist.”

“Tommy—” Wilbur started, slowly moving his hands up to Tommy’s shoulders to gently push him away. Tommy reluctantly moved, pulling back just enough to see Wilbur’s face but keeping his own hands on his brother’s biceps in a near death-grip.

What did Tommy even want to hear now? An “*I’m not lying*”? “*I just wanted to protect you*”?

“Tommy, I’m sorry for lying to you,” Wilbur said instead, making Tommy bruised knuckles tighten further around his arms. “I— I recently found out that Techno and Phil have been lying to me about some important stuff recently and— and that hasn’t really been fun, so I know how it feels and I’m *sorry*. But you— Tommy I can’t help you if I don’t know what’s going *on*,” he said in a pleading tone.

Oh gods. They were going to have the conversation *now*?

Tommy stared at him, watching Wilbur’s expression intently as the other studied Tommy. His eyes flitted around the teen’s face, pausing on what Tommy could only assume were cuts and bruises from days of fighting on the run. He slowly took in every inch of Tommy, his brows drawing further together and lips pursing as his hands found the bandages on Tommy’s shoulder under the borrowed sweater.

“Tommy, what happened to you?” Wilbur asked again, his thumbs rubbing gentle circles into Tommy’s shoulders. “Please tell me what’s going on.”

Tommy couldn’t help but laugh a little bit at the repeated request.

“Why should I tell you, Wilbur? Give— give me a reason, give me *anything*. I— *fuck* — please just— *please* Wilbur I need a-a *reason*,” he stuttered, hand flexing where he still held Wilbur’s biceps. “*Please*.”

Wilbur just stared back at him uncomprehendingly. His expression of confused concern only grew as he searched Tommy’s face again.

“I just want to help you, Tommy,” he said softly. “You’re obviously going through something and— I’m— I’m offering to help, isn’t that reason enough?”

“No!” Tommy found himself shouting and shaking Wilbur by the arms slightly. “That’s not fucking enough! You— *fuck!*” He swore again, frustrated by his own inability to explain what was wrong, to even understand the thoughts themselves.

Wilbur winced slightly at the sound of Tommy raising his voice but pressed on, looking nearly as frustrated and desperate as Tommy was starting to feel.

“Then— what do I need to do Tommy? Why— am I not enough? Dammit child I— you’re my *brother* and I *love you* and I just— I don’t want to see you hurting like this and I don’t want you to make any of the same mistakes I did at your age and I—“ he took a shuddering

breath, his hands tightening on Tommy's shoulders. "I want to keep you *safe* Tommy, please just *let me help you* ."

Tommy watched as small tears started to gather in Wilbur's eyes and could feel his own start to sting.

You're my brother and I love you.

Why did his life have to be so goddamn *unfair*?

"Wilbur, I— I really care about you, and I care about Phil and maybe even Techno too. I love our weird little family and our freaky little normal life and I— I know you all care about me so much that it's so fucking terrifying—" he cut himself off as his voice threatened to crack.

There was just no easy way to say it, but there was no more time not to say it.

"Wilbur I love you," Tommy said, "but I don't trust you."

The instant wounded expression that took over Wilbur's features was almost enough to make Tommy regret saying it.

Almost.

"I— what?" Wilbur started, his hands suddenly falling lax from Tommy's shoulders. "You don't... I don't understand," he said, mouth twisting in confusion.

Tommy forced himself to relax and pulled his own hands away from Wilbur, taking a tentative step back.

He still needed to leave.

He found himself smiling almost a little manically. "Wilbur, we don't know anything about each other. You— I've known you for months and you've given me no reasons to trust you! How— what did you expect?"

Wilbur stared at him, jaw slack in an expression of disbelief. "No reasons to trust— are you kidding me? So what? All of this has been an act? You've just been pretending to trust me when you weren't sure about your place with us? When you had nightmares and came to me *crying* in the middle of the night? It meant *nothing* when I told you about the shit I went through as a kid? All that crap we have in common just isn't enough? That's not trust?"

"It's not enough!" Tommy argued, throwing his arms out wildly. "You've never even bothered to mention the very basics of any fucking small talk conversation! Every new person I meet *always* brings up powers within the first five minutes of a conversation, but not you! Not Techno or Phil either! It's been months and none of you talk about powers and *lie* about your jobs!"

Wilbur scowled. "So *that's* your standard for if someone's trustworthy? What their powers are or what they do for work? Do you hear yourself?"

“If it’s not a big deal then tell me!” Tommy challenged, starting to feel desperate. “Just write me off as a foster kid with trust issues and humour me if there’s nothing to hide!”

And—

And Wilbur said nothing.

Tommy’s heart sank. It wasn’t surprising in the slightest, but it still hurt. Tommy had never cared about someone he didn’t trust.

He had always been too quick to trust as a child, handing out his heart to any fool that would look his way. Once he was hurt enough times he learned to stop trusting, and that always started with not caring.

This was something new, and something absolutely terrifying.

Wilbur sighed quietly, his shoulders slumping as he reached up to pinch at the bridge of his nose. Maybe having this conversation while one part was hung over wasn’t the best time, but it was a little late for that.

“So if I tell you my powers or my job, that’ll be enough?” Wilbur asked quietly, his eyes sliding past Tommy and focusing on something in the next room with a frown.

“It’ll depend on the answers,” Tommy answered wearily. “If it’s anything along the line of what I think it is...” Tommy trailed off, not wanting to finish the thought.

The, *it won’t be enough*, still went unsaid.

No matter who Wilbur was, he couldn’t be on Theseus’s side.

That was the thing about being a vigilante, there was no difference between the dangers of heroes or villains, they all wanted you dead.

Wilbur pursed his lips, his gaze falling on the floor between them instead of back on Tommy.

“I...I don’t talk about my powers because nobody trusts me after they know,” Wilbur said, arms crossing protectively over his chest. “You...I don’t think you’re going to like the answers much, Toms. It’s not going to make me seem trustworthy.”

Tommy bit his lip, relishing the slight sting of a scab breaking under his teeth. He knew that feeling, it was why he never pressed Wilbur about his powers before. If Wilbur had some villain type power, ones worth criminals kidnapping him as a child, then of course he wouldn’t want to just tell people.

But still.

“If you want any chance at me actually telling you what’s going on instead of walking out that door, you’ll have to take the risk,” Tommy said, flexing his hands at his sides. “I’ve known a lot of people with crazy powers, I sincerely doubt there’s much you could say that would actually scare me.”

This time it was Wilbur that laughed sadly. “I’m not so sure about that one mate,” he said, finally meeting Tommy’s eyes again.

The silence between them seemed to stretch on forever, neither of them brave enough to be the one to break it.

Thunder rumbled outside as the wind buffeted hard against the side of the apartment building, making the sounds of the rain that much louder.

“If you’re not willing to throw me a fucking bone here, then I *really* need to leave Wilbur,” Tommy said eventually, taking another step back. “I— I don’t want to put you in any more danger.”

“You’re not putting me in danger Tommy,” Wilbur said, expression hardening. “I’m more than capable of handling myself and I can keep you safe too, I promise.”

Tommy pursed his lips and shook his head, taking another half step back. “If that were true you wouldn’t have been in that car crash.”

Wilbur stared for a beat before his eyes went wide.

Tommy tensed even further, bracing for the anger or accusations. He wasn’t prepared for the way Wilbur’s expression suddenly softened and he shook his head.

“Tommy that wasn’t your fault, I don’t know what—“

“The guy that hit you cornered me at the hospital,” Tommy cut him off desperately. “He said that the accident was supposed to kill you and that the shooting Phil got caught in was just supposed to be a warning. You almost *died* because of *me*. And if I can’t find a way to stop that bastard in the next few days, everyone I know is on the firing line. You’ve already proven that you can’t protect yourselves, so I sincerely doubt you can protect me too.”

Wilbur’s small frown twisted into something else Tommy couldn’t read as he shook his head again. “Tommy I promise you that if you stay, I can use my powers to protect us.”

Tommy couldn’t help but scoff. “Oh yeah? And how exactly do you expect me to believe that when I don’t even know what they are, hmm?”

Once again, Wilbur went quiet at the challenge.

The tense silence stretched on as Wilbur seemed to debate with himself, looking everywhere but Tommy as he massaged at his temples and shifted where he stood.

Tommy resisted the urge to pick at his lips, biting at the skin of them instead as he shifted awkwardly.

He needed to *leave*.

Or he needed an answer.

Wilbur broke the tension with a harsh sigh that made Tommy tense again.

“Mind control,” he said abruptly, throwing his hands up in exasperation. “If anyone tries to come after you while I’m around, as long as they can hear and understand me, I can tell them to fuck off and they’ll have no choice.”

Tommy’s heart nearly skipped a beat as he registered the words.

Holy shit.

“Oh,” Tommy replied after a moment.

Wilbur was right, that really didn’t make Tommy want to trust him a whole lot off the bat.

Tommy knew dozens of people with terrifying levels of power. Memoir could steal people’s memories, Karl Jacobs could see through time, Chiller could freeze a man solid and HBomb could turn any solid into an explosive. Hell, he once watched Drista summon a ravager to fuck with Foolish Gae’meers for the hell of it.

He had faced heroes and villains with equally terrifying powers, like The Blade’s ability to steal the energy right from your body or Styx instantly murdering thirty men with a single dose of Trigger.

But mind control? No wonder someone had been willing to start a gang war over Wilbur. That was an absolute trump card when played right.

It could also be the single most terrifying thing to happen to Tommy if it was one of those rare powers that worked on him until he activated his own to counteract it.

It was also one of those high level powers that got people put on watchlists or in prison, like Tommy would be if his powers were ever discovered.

But it was *also* by far the best option Tommy had for protection at the moment.

Was the promise of safety enough to just give in and hand over his full trust? Could he count on Wilbur to truly protect him if Tommy told him the truth?

But whose side was Wilbur on? Someone with powers of his calibre weren’t allowed to just go about their lives. Was someone watching him? Or was he flying under the radar like Tommy? Was it possible Wilbur was just a neutral party? Could he be using his powers this whole time to stay away from the world of power registration or villain protections?

No matter what the answer was, what the hell was Tommy gonna do?

He swallowed around the sudden dryness in his throat, watching as Wilbur now refused to meet his eyes.

“Does it have any tells?” He asked eventually.

Wilbur didn't look up as he nodded. "My eyes glow red when I activate my powers and if the command is very much against that person's own will, they will notice the power being used on them."

Tommy frowned, searching his memories for any times he may have seen Wilbur using his powers yet coming up empty handed.

"Have you ever used your power on me?" He asked, voice sounding much weaker than he would have liked to admit.

Finally Wilbur looked up, meeting Tommy's gaze with an odd softness in his brown eyes.

"I don't use my powers on civilians," he said, something in his tone that gave Tommy a nagging sense of deja-vu that he couldn't quite place.

Tommy blinked and nodded slowly.

"If...if I tried to leave now, would you use your powers to stop me?" He found himself asking, hands clenching uselessly at his sides.

Wilbur's expression crumbled as he shook his head. "No," he said tiredly, stumbling back a few steps until his knees hit the bed and he sat down hard. "I've made enough mistakes this week, no need to make myself more of a monster than I already have."

"You're not a monster," Tommy immediately argued, making Wilbur look up in surprise.

Tommy blinked back at him, unsure how to even continue that thought. He forced a small scowl to cover it. "You do, however, smell like an alcoholic hobo," he huffed in as much of a teasing tone as he could manage. "You should definitely take a shower or brush your teeth or something."

Wilbur's face softened slightly as his lips twitched in a small smile. "Yeah, I do smell pretty bad, don't I?" He chuckled.

"Yeah, dickhead I just said that," Tommy scoffed. "You're not going deaf too, are you?"

His brother smiled just the tiniest bit wider. "I'd hope not, wouldn't be very helpful in our current situation." He tried to say it like a joke but the comment had both their smiles quickly fading.

They stared at each other for another long moment, the sound of the rain against the windows softening to a much lighter pattering.

"Will you still be here when I get out of the shower?" Wilbur asked eventually, hands twisting in his lap.

Tommy bit his lip, glancing over his shoulder at the gear bag still resting on the floor next to the front door.

"I don't know," he said honestly. "I think I need a minute to think it over."

Wilbur watched him for a long moment before he nodded with a small hum and pushed back to his feet. Then his arms were around Tommy again, hands fisted in the back of the borrowed black and purple jacket.

Tommy allowed himself to melt into it for just a moment, arms coming up to return the hug just as tight.

“Thank you,” Wilbur whispered into his hair. “It’s a lot nicer to wake up with family around rather than wherever I passed out after making poor decisions.”

Family.

Tommy’s eyes burned as he laughed weakly. “Yeah, I bet it is, now go get clean up you stinky bastard.”

Wilbur's laugh resonated in his chest in a way that made Tommy’s muscles loosen just the tiniest bit in comfort.

“I love you, Toms,” he said, arms squeezing tighter for a brief moment.

Tommy’s breath shuddered as he buried his face in Wilbur's shoulder. “I love you too.”

-

It was only as Tommy stood in front of the apartment door once more, staring at the deadbolt lever and replaying their conversation over in his head that it clicked.

“I don’t use my powers on civilians,” Whisper promised, the corner of his soft brown eyes crinkling slightly as his expressions settled beneath his half face mask.

Soft brown eyes that matched the fluffy brown hair that the hero had pushed back with his goggles to look Tommy in the eye as they spoke.

Mind control.

Tommy picked at the skin on his lip as he stared at the door handle and the gear bag still resting on the floor.

Theseus wouldn’t be safe here, not under the protection of one of the top heroes in the city. Not with one of The Blade’s closest allies.

Hopefully, Tommy could keep Theseus dead long enough for *someone* to make it out of this alive.

Chapter End Notes

AAAAHAHA WE'RE FINALLY GETTING SOMEWHERE!!!

At the time of writing this, I'm currently writing the first draft of chapter 29, so we're definitely moving along here. But yeah I got covid and just wrote like a madman for my whole quarantine so we'll see if my pacing can hold up like that again.

You may have noticed that chapter count change, but that is a rough estimate, not a promise. I finally had the time to sit down and outline the rest of the story by scenes and came up with the rough chapter count, but we'll see if it gets away from me and ends up being more or not idk.

We've still got a lot of moving parts and storylines to check in on and tie into, but finally, some of the characters are starting to see the bigger picture which is very exciting. So stick with me and hopefully, you'll get to see the fluff at the end of the tunnel :)

Leave a kudos and comment if you've read this far, I always love to hear how people are feeling even if it's just screaming into the void!

Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Quackity tries to mitigate his mistakes.

Wilbur makes breakfast for lunch.

Chapter Notes

Welcome back to the shit show dear readers!

Sorry for the unplanned break there, I've left a little note regarding that and recent events in the end notes <3

Thank you to everyone who is still here, even having just a few of you would mean so much considering that I have officially been writing this for over a year! (I didn't post until months after I started)

I'm sorry I don't really reply to comments, I'm too awkward. But I read every single one and they are the lifeblood I crave, so thank you to everyone who's commented ever <3. Also special thanks to my beloved beta and Cheese who helped me look over this chapter!

So! We are really diving head first into the rising action which is going to include more chapters that require specific warnings! As always be mindful of the normal tags, but this chapter's **CW/TW: References to Abuse, Child Abuse, Mild Gaslighting and Character Death!!!**

To skip the worst of it stop reading at *"His hands flew up to Schlatt's on instinct,"* and pick up again after the scene change at the "-----". I'll put a section summary in the end notes!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Quackity fucked up.

He miscalculated, he misjudged, he underestimated his enemies and overestimated his friends. Hell, he fucking let the line between enemies and friends blur for too long and now everyone was paying the gods-damned price.

In short, he wasn't supposed to let it get this far.

All he wanted was to protect his people. Fuck sides, fuck the law, he just wanted to keep everyone *he* cared about safe and alive.

And now very few of them were safe and some of them were barely alive, last he heard.

A new kind of guilt had reared its head the morning after the handler attacked Wilbur. He had called the man to try and avoid such an outcome, and while last he checked Wilbur survived, the last thing he had wanted to do was drag Niki into this mess. They *both* could have died, just because Quackity was stupid enough to work off bad intel.

He glanced at the two body bags in the opposite corner of Schlatt's office and pursed his lips. He wasn't sure if he would have considered Minx and Emma to be part of his people, but he would have preferred them alive too.

He turned back to the corner behind him where Tubbo was zip-tied and duct taped to a metal chair, his head tipped back against the wall behind him and his eyes closed. Just as he had been for the last six hours despite being very much awake.

He also would have preferred it if Tubbo hadn't been pushed so far that he killed them, but it was a little fucking late for those kinds of regrets.

Not that he didn't regret it. If he could take back every action of his in the last few years that led them here, he'd do it in a heartbeat.

What a fucking mess.

"Hey sweet cheeks, come help me move this desk," Schlatt called over, watching Quackity expectantly as he neatly cuffed his dress shirt sleeves.

A couple of weeks ago Quackity might have even risked punching Schlatt for trying to call him pet names again, but he couldn't risk that anymore. He might not be able to take back any of his shitty choices now, but he could try his damndest to do better moving forward. He'd do whatever it took to stay at Schlatt's side now, for Tubbo's sake.

And if protecting Tubbo meant rolling over for Schlatt like the dumbass Quackity was when they met, then he would do it without complaint.

As he moved to comply he didn't even sigh or comment on how Schlatt was absolutely strong enough to move the desk on his own.

Schlatt laughed at him and shook his head, taking up the side opposite Quackity as the desk to lift it. "You know, you're not fooling anyone by suddenly being so agreeable," he teased. "If you didn't want me to know you were planning on betraying me, you should have just stayed as bitchy as before to keep me from thinking too hard about it."

Quackity sighed through his nose, shaking his head as they lifted the desk and started to shuffle towards the back wall with it. "I'm not playing nice to make you think I'm on your side, Schlatt."

They settled the desk back against the wall and Schlatt raised an eyebrow at him. “Then what exactly are you trying to accomplish? Because if you wanted me back, *begging* would be the best way to get my attention. You always look—”

“I’m playing *nice*, ” Quackity cut in sharply, not wanting to hear what kind of vitriol was going to come from that particular comment, “because I don’t want you to decide I’m a risk and kick me out or kill me.”

Schlatt frowned at him for a long moment before he stepped back towards the liquor cabinet beside the desk. He didn’t take his eyes off Quackity as he slowly opened the cabinet, retrieving a short glass and the half-full bottle of whiskey from within.

“Funny,” he said, pouring a generous amount of the amber liquid into the glass, “I thought you only stuck around here because I’m *blackmailing* you.”

Quackity watched with growing discomfort as Schlatt took a deep drink of the liquor, his dark eyes never leaving Quackity.

Quackity wasn’t stupid. Years of dealing with Schlatt had every single tell and sign of the man’s anger burned into Quackity’s bones and memory, so he could tell by the rise of the man’s shoulders and the even tone of the challenge that lying would only bring pain.

Not that he was counting on telling the truth to save him from it.

“I *was*, ” Quackity corrected slowly. “But in case you haven’t noticed, it’s been a few weeks since anyone actually saw Ace on duty.” He swallowed hard, hoping to hide the nervous strain in his voice as he continued. “Now I’ll admit, I had my own goals in ditching the hero duties. I wanted to keep up the status quo as much as I could while also getting you what you wanted without burning down the city, so sue me. But you win Schlatt, you managed to keep me in the dark enough that I fucked up beyond repair and now I’ve got nothing. So now I’m *here* to manage what I can, and avoid what I can’t.”

Schlatt studied him with piercing eyes that made Quackity feel like he was lying even when he wasn’t. The glass in the ram-hybrid’s hands clinked as he drummed his fingers on the side of it.

Honestly, Quackity probably wouldn’t even fight it if Schlatt just lost it on him now, he kind of felt like he deserved a beating for his fuck ups sooner or later.

Schlatt hummed. “So then what exactly are you here to *manage*, in that case. You’ve always known that you have no power in my organization’s ranks, you’re my bitch and nobody’s boss, so what exactly are you trying to accomplish? You’d probably have better luck if you ran off with that rogue boyfriend of yours, or hell even if you came clean to that hero boy toy he could help you get out of the country before shit doesn’t go your way. Why stay in the heart of the lion’s den when you know you’re just a little lost puppy?”

Quackity bit down on a torrent of curses and protests at Schlatt’s words. He wanted to get a rise out of Quackity, arguing he wasn’t a bitch or a kicked puppy, because he *wasn’t*.

Quackity was a fucking hero who could hold his own, and because of that, he knew when he was at a disadvantage and not to push it.

But if you're always at a disadvantage to him, then doesn't that just make you his bitch? An ugly voice in his head argued. *You've stopped fighting back.*

Yet, despite being a hero who was as in control here as he could be, Schlatt always had a way of making Quackity nervous enough to slip up.

He couldn't help the way his gaze drifted back towards Tubbo. He was surprised to meet tired green eyes, open for the first time Quackity had seen all day.

Schlatt followed the movement and promptly burst out laughing.

He laughed long and hard, making Quackity want to shrink into the floor or punch him in the face. Behind them, something Quackity couldn't quite read settled over Tubbo's blank expression.

"Oh that's *rich!*" Schlatt cackled. "The big puppy can't help but come back for another beating as long as he knows where the runt is." He howled again, slamming his empty glass down on the desk.

Quackity resisted the urge to bite his lip, crossing his arms instead with a small sigh. "Fine, yes. I just want to stay on your good side to look out for the kid, okay? Just let me keep an eye on him and I'll stay out of your way. I promise I'm not spying, I'm not gonna do something stupid like let the heroes follow us back, I just want to look after him. I won't even go back to hero duty if you want."

Schlatt grinned like he was bearing his teeth at prey. "One less hero to get in my way? How could I say no to that?" He rolled his shoulders and turned to face Tubbo. "What do you say kiddo? Feel like having a designated babysitter this time? It'll be easier to keep track of you that way."

Tubbo, predictably, glared at the man and drew his lips back in an ugly snarl. "What the fuck makes you think I'd want to spend any time with *him*," the teen spat, throwing his glare at Quackity. "He's never done anything but fucking *stand* there and let you to whatever the hell you want. I'd rather have some rando who does it for the money than a *snivelling coward*," he spat, the words directed at Quackity more than Schlatt.

That wasn't entirely true, and Tubbo knew it. Quackity had done a lot over the years to direct Schlatt's anger at himself instead of Tubbo and the kid had always made his gratitude known, usually by calling him an idiot.

But Tubbo's rage at the moment was also justified. Quackity still felt sick to his stomach as he remembered standing in the doorway, staring blankly at the body of the tiny hero pinned against the crates with Minx's spear. His knuckles still ached from how hard they clenched when Schlatt had shot Endwalker.

Tubbo had every right to hate him, but that didn't mean he could just abandon the kid.

Schlatt hummed, one dress shoe tapping against the concrete floor like the rattle of a snake about to strike. “So if he’s of no use to *me* and *you* don’t want him,” he mused, shifting so both of them could see the dark smile on his lips. “Then I should probably just dispose of him.”

Schlatt’s eyes flashed purple as he suddenly lunged at Quackity, hands reaching straight for his throat.

Pure instinct made him quick to activate his own powers in kind, the luck surging through his veins just in time to allow him to dodge the villain's first strike.

Quackity ducked under Schlatt’s arms, pivoting in a crouch to make a break outside of his reach. The biggest mistake someone could make while fighting Schlatt was staying anywhere within grabbing distance because of the man's powers. If Quackity could just get away for a second and start attacking with weapons at a distance, he might stand a chance of escaping.

Except luck could only get you so far in a lose-lose situation. Quackity made it all of three steps back as he pulled three small disks from his utility belt before he felt a hard object clip the edge of his shoulder enough to knock him off balance.

He only saw the liquor bottle crash to the floor from the corner of his eye as he whirled back around, explosive disks already flying right at Schlatt. Of course, the man was barely phased, only pausing as the disks hit their marks, exploding with enough force to shove him off balance.

Quackity took full advantage of the short window of opportunity, breaking into a dead sprint for the office's one exit. This was his only shot, slim as it was. Even if Quackity could escape the office he’d still have to fight his way through the entire bases worth of Schlatt’s lackeys, but he stood better chances of that than escaping certain death here.

He slammed into the heavy doors with his entire body weight before abruptly yanking back on the handle in vain.

The doors were locked.

Quackity was fucked.

He turned just in time to meet Schlatt’s fist with his face, crying out as he felt the familiar crack and wet heat of his nose breaking. However, rather than let him fall to the ground and kick him while he was down, Schlatt’s hands caught the hero by the neck and slammed him back against the door.

Quackity’s head hit the metal with a painful crack and bounced once, making him cry out behind clenched teeth. Schlatt only laughed at his pain before the hands suddenly tightened around his throat, cutting off his breathing with only half a lungful of air.

His hands flew up to Schlatt’s on instinct, clawing uselessly at his iron grip as he gasped for air. The only thing he got was a mouthful of blood as his nose kept bleeding from the break.

“Schlatt stop!” Tubbo shouted, sounding more angry than anything else from where he was still tied at the back of the room.

Schlatt laughed again, pushing harder against Quackity until black spots started to dance in his eyes and his ears started to ring. “Why should I?” he called back. “Suddenly change your mind? I’m not sure how much I care now!”

Quackity’s body started to run on autopilot, thrashing violently yet ultimately uselessly in the villain’s unbreakable hold. Still, it didn’t stop one of Quackity’s hands from dropping back to his belt and returning to slash at Schlatt’s arms with a throwing knife. Schlatt rolled his eyes at the motion and grunted, the pressure increased impossibly so as he lifted Quackity’s feet off the floor, pinning him to the wall by his throat.

“Stop it!” Tubbo protested, fear starting to bleed into his tone in a way that would probably earn him a beating later.

“This is so cruel Tubbo, I can’t believe you’re making me do this!” Schlatt mocked with a sharp laugh that drowned out the next round of protests from the boy.

Quackity couldn’t help but fight with a renewed desperation as his own body weight and gravity only assisted the crushing of his windpipe. He drew his arm back farther and brought it down with enough force that the blade shattered against Schlatt’s forearm, tearing open his suit jacket and shirt while the skin beneath remained unmarred.

Tubbo’s cries only grew louder, as did the ringing in Quackity’s ears and the painful pressure behind his eyes. He squeezed his eyes shut, body still jerking involuntarily against the lack of air in his lungs.

Eventually, he could hear the cracks in Tubbo’s facade as the boy was nearly begging, his tone wavering even as the words became too hard for Quackity to process. Still, Schlatt’s grip didn’t let up.

Even when he was dying, Quackity couldn’t do anything right by Tubbo. Schlatt was just using it as another way to traumatize the kid and there was nothing Quackity could do about it.

So much for giving it all up to protect the kid, it was just another huge fuck up in a long line of mistakes.

Schlatt’s disappointed sigh was still close enough to smell the cigars and sour liquor on his breath. When he spoke it was like the words were underwater, but years of training had Quackity’s ears straining to understand him despite the unimaginable pain he was in.

“Consider this a lesson kid, I’m done playing nice with you even if you beg,” Schlatt said, presumably to Tubbo and not the nearly unconscious man still in his hold.

Tubbo’s sobs would echo with guilt within Quackity’s soul for as long as he lived, as short as that seemed it would be at the moment.

“But hey, if you behave for long enough then *maybe* I’ll consider bringing him back for you,” Schlatt laughed. “He had his uses.”

Tubbo screamed as the hands around Quackity’s neck tightened impossibly so, causing cartilage and muscle to give in their wake.

The sickening crunch of his own windpipe and the sound of Tubbo’s cries had never made Quackity so glad to finally lose awareness of his own body.

As fast as the pain spiked it abruptly faded, giving way to an unwelcome kind of darkness.

Wilbur shivered as another line of cold water ran its way down the back of his shirt, tracing slowly down the taut line of muscles in his shoulders and back.

After a long moment, he forced himself to look away from Tommy’s sleeping form with a sigh, snaking a hand through his damp, tangled hair.

To be honest, he hadn’t expected Tommy to stay. He was so sure that the poorly concealed fear that flashed in Tommy’s eyes when Wilbur admitted his power was the final nail in the coffin of their failing relationship, yet here he was, passed out on Wilbur’s couch like it was the most normal thing in the world.

Of course, it wasn’t exactly normal, not really. When Wilbur looked around the open space of his apartment he could see little details all over that told a story he didn’t want to consider. The cabinet under the kitchen sink was partially held open by the first aid kit haphazardly shoved inside. There were dried bloody fingerprints staining on the cabinet’s silver handle and dark drops to match it across the floor leading to the couch, some on the coffee table and even on the frame of the master bedroom door.

Wilbur couldn’t remember walking around the apartment at all, much less bleeding from an injury he didn’t have, meaning the blood was *Tommy’s*. Tommy, who still hadn’t explained anything about why he ran. Tommy, who was in trouble and still trying to protect them. Tommy, who blamed himself for the accident that nearly got Wilbur killed a week ago.

Tommy, who definitely had bandages on his shoulder and tried to hide his flinch when Wilbur hugged him too tight.

Tommy, who owned the heavy duffel bag and worn combat boots still sitting next to the front door. As much as Wilbur wanted to deny the thought, that’s what they were, scuffed, heavy, black combat boots with red laces and burns that scored deep into the leather, probably from an explosive of some kind.

Tommy wasn’t the only one observant enough to see when his brother was packing clothes he shouldn’t own. He had never seen Tommy wear anything but ratty converse or the running shoes Phil probably had to beg to buy him, yet those boots were so undeniably Tommy’s. The oversized jacket thrown over the back of the couch wasn’t, however. It looked to be two sizes

too big for the scrawny kid and purple was hardly his colour. It looked oddly familiar in a way that Wilbur didn't want to waste time considering, he wasn't sure if he'd like the answer.

Point was, nothing about any of this was normal anymore, but maybe it had been stupid to pretend that it was normal *ever*.

Wilbur spared the bag by the door another glance and resisted the urge to sigh again. It was a military surplus bag made of thick black canvas and packed full by the looks of it. He didn't want to think about where Tommy got it, why he needed it in the first place.

Of course, none of it had ever been normal. A normal kid Tommy's age would've been freaked out by Wilbur's family in a second, he wouldn't have found them comforting or whatever Tommy thought they were. Still, the illusion was nice while it lasted.

He turned towards the kitchen in defeat. Whatever was going to happen when Tommy woke up was going to require food and probably some painkillers for the fading dredges of his hangover.

3:31, the clock read.

Seemed like the perfect time for breakfast to Wilbur.

Still, as he set about digging through the fridge for the sad remanence of breakfast food, four eggs and a half empty package of bacon, Wilbur couldn't stop his mind from wandering.

There were too many half answers trying to twist in his mind like a tangled tapestry that couldn't yet form a full picture.

Someone was after Tommy, but why? Did it have to do with his life before he met them? Had he lied when they first met at the hospital? Did Tommy really have gang ties and that's why the Blackwells attacked him? Or had he somehow crafted the whole story and pinned it on the lowly drug dealers? Or was he telling the truth the whole time and they were still missing the big picture? Or did Tommy know why and just refuse to involve the authorities?

The attack that sent Wilbur's car into the river was apparently because of Tommy as well, but then why did Quackity call to warn him? Why had Quackity been avoiding his and everyone else's calls since then? Was he the latest hero to randomly go missing and Wilbur was out of the loop or was there something else?

Not to mention that Tommy said the man who attacked Wilbur and Phil was the one that cornered him at the hospital. If this truly all revolved around Tommy, then why would the handler let him go? Why taunt Tommy and let him walk away instead of capturing him or killing him? What did they even *want* with Tommy? Why hurt his family?

More questions chased themselves in circles around Wilbur's mind as he got to making food for both him and Tommy. Questions of suit gangs and teenagers sneaking out and missing heroes. Problems of old combat boots, of where his little brother learned how to fight well enough to impress even Techno and how this all fit into the bigger picture with Trigger like Techno seemed to think it might.

He didn't even notice Tommy had woken up until he was plating the eggs and bacon to go with the slightly burnt toast already on the counter.

"What would it take for you to turn me in," Tommy said, suddenly appearing in Wilbur's peripheral vision where he leaned against the fridge.

Wilbur had to stop himself from jumping in order to stop from throwing their food all over the counter.

"Bloody hell, child," he gasped, gently placing the pan down, "at least warn a man before you sneak up on him while cooking."

He glanced over to find Tommy frowning at him with an expectant look in his eyes.

"What?"

"You haven't answered my question," the teen replied flatly, crossing his arms. The line of his shoulders was far too tense for the movement to be truly relaxed, but Wilbur politely ignored it.

"You're gonna have to be more specific," he replied, returning his attention back to plating the food. "I don't think I heard you right anyway." At least he hoped not.

Tommy sighed like he was exasperated, though Wilbur could tell it was far from it. Like everything else Tommy had done since Wilbur woke up the poor kid just seemed... taut. Wound up like a cable ready to snap every time a wire frayed.

"If...I wanted to tell you everything," Tommy started slowly, "I would want to know, ah, where exactly you're aligned on this...business, I guess."

Wilbur stared down at the two plates of food for a beat, trying to make any of those words into a question that made sense. He frowned, picking up one of the plates and turning to offer it to Tommy. "I'm afraid you've actually lost me there," he said, holding the plate out like a peace offering.

Tommy made no move to take it, his eyes glued to Wilbur's face with enough intensity he was tempted to look away. "Wilbur, if I told you I killed somebody, would you turn me in?"

And honestly, despite years of schooling and training, Wilbur would never be a moral enough man to immediately say *yes* like a real hero would.

"*Did* you kill somebody?" he asked instead, still holding out the plate. He wasn't exactly in a place to judge somebody for killing people, he was related to Techno and Phil, after all.

Tommy's head tilted in an almost bird-like way that reminded him of Phil, eyes narrowing. "That wasn't what I asked."

Wilbur hummed, finally putting the plate down on the counter where Tommy could get it himself and reached for his own food, taking a bite as he mulled over his answer.

To be fair, as much as he hoped it wasn't the case it would kind of make sense if Tommy killed someone. At least that would be enough of a reason to torture some random powerless teenager, depending on who he killed and *why*.

"Well, if you *theoretically* told me you killed a man my first question would be why, or maybe who. Then depending on your answer, I'd probably try to help you find a way to clean up the mess." He took another bite of egg and considered it for a moment longer. "Actually, no matter what your answers were I'd help you, even if it was stupid or I didn't agree."

For some reason that only made Tommy stare at him like he had grown a second head, though Wilbur couldn't fathom why. Wasn't that the kind of answer you wanted to hear? That your brother was the guy you could call to help you hide the body?

"Seriously?" Tommy asked, unable to hide the disbelief in his tone.

Wilbur shrugged as he bit into the less burnt piece of toast. "I mean the guy's already dead, I might lecture you about it but I have no interest in seeing someone else kill you over it or sending you to jail," he said around the bite of food. "We like *just* started to work out your trust issues, it'd be a total waste."

That managed to draw a startled laugh out of Tommy that made Wilbur smile. Finally, Tommy uncurled himself from the side of the fridge and slinked forward to retrieve his own food from the counter.

"You're nuts," Tommy chuckled, shaking his head as he took an oversized bite of toast.

"And yet you're about to ask me for help hiding a body, so I don't think you're in any place to judge," Wilbur teased lightly.

"I didn't kill anyone," Tommy protested around a mouthful of food.

"Then why were you asking how I'd react if you did?"

Once again Tommy hesitated before turning back to his meal without answering. Wilbur pursed his lips but forced himself to drop it and look away again.

He— of course he was worried, sue him. Tommy had been missing for nearly a week and showed back up covered in bruises and shrouded in mystery and half-truths. Any leads that Wilbur had tried to find over the past few days had led him to dead ends and a concerning amount of non-answers. Something was so obviously wrong on so many levels that Wilbur hadn't been prepared to consider, so how could he not worry?

He found his gaze drawn to Tommy's hands as they ate in silence. All of his knuckles were decorated with scabs and bruises that layered as though they had been reinjured and healed over again. Tommy had been fighting hard, probably for days. He had been alone because he didn't feel like any of them were trustworthy enough to ask for help or admit something was wrong.

Where was this going? What would happen next?

“So you know about Trigger, right?” Tommy said, breaking the quiet tension in the kitchen air. “The stuff that messed up Techno?”

Wilbur resisted the urge to grimace at the reminder of Techno, recalling how stellar their last interaction was. “Yeah?”

Tommy didn’t look up from his quickly emptying plate as he spoke, hands still moving as he pushed around the remainder of the food without eating it. “The, um— the guy that makes it, J. Schlatt, is the guy that’s after me. So, that’s not great.”

A chill ran down Wilbur’s spine, making the muscles in his jaw tense. There was something just *wrong* about the way Tommy said it, like Schlatt was more of an inconvenience than the monster in the shadows that he was. Like he was just resigned to it.

But that also meant that Techno was right, if Tommy really did bolt at the first sign that Techno knew about Trigger it meant he was part of this. Somehow like everything else in the city for the past few months, this also tied back into the mystery of Trigger.

There was nothing comforting about that thought.

“Do you know why?” Wilbur asks instead of freaking out like he wants to. Flashes of the villain dead at his feet are wiped from his mind as fast as they appeared, leaving Wilbur’s hands with a vague craving for violence.

He was not as good a man as he’d like to be, though that was hardly a new revelation at this point.

Tommy nodded slowly, every line of his body bleeding exhaustion in a way it hadn’t earlier. “I, um, I keep trying to come up with scenarios where this works out for everyone but I’m coming up blank,” he said instead of explaining. “I- I think I’d like to find a way to stay with you guys, or at least you. Maybe Phil too but-” Tommy cut himself off with a sigh and shook his head. “I don’t know what’s happening anymore honestly. I tried it my way but it’s getting me nowhere.”

Wilbur set his fork down, leaving the plate clean aside from the most burnt corner of toast. “You don’t trust Techno,” he says, more of a statement than a question. He couldn’t really comment on whatever ‘Tommy’s way’ had been since the boy had yet to fully explain, but he could still read between the lines.

Tommy pursed his lips, brows drawing together as he glared at his own plate. “It’s... complicated. I think I trust all of you more now that you gave me something to work with but it’s different with Techno. He’s different.”

“He would never hurt you, Tommy,” Wilbur said earnestly. “Trigger or not, he’d never do that.”

Tommy hardly looked like he agreed but he hummed noncommittally, so Wilbur refrained from pushing it. Like he had said, they *just* started to work on Tommy’s trust issues and Wilbur knew from experience that it wasn’t something that could be solved in a day.

When Tommy made no move to continue the conversation Wilbur forced himself to take the initiative. He was *so close* to understanding what was going on here, to seeing the bigger picture, but he just needed to know what Schlatt wanted with Tommy and hopefully, everything would fall into place.

“Why is Schlatt after you Tommy?” *What do you have that he needs? What did you do to piss him off? What do you know?*

The teen took a shaking breath as he lifted his head to stare up at the ceiling as though silently praying to a higher power. He crossed his arms and leaned back against the counter behind him, letting the breath go with just as much shaking to it.

All of it was so uncharacteristic for Tommy that it made Wilbur’s skin crawl. Usually, when he was uncomfortable the boy at least tried to feign annoyance in its place, not this exhausted vulnerability he had worn like an old blanket since Wilbur woke up.

“Schlatt needs little ol’ me because of this *tiny* secret I’ve got,” he laughed, the sound tinged with bitterness, “called my unregistered powers.” His eyes flicked to Wilbur as he said it, the wariness in them plain as the midday sun.

Wilbur couldn’t help but meet them with what he could only assume was his own wide-eyed look of shock.

Tommy wasn’t asking him to help hide a body, Tommy was asking if he would help him hide his powers.

If Tommy had unregistered powers that were interesting enough to gain the attention of a villain like Schlatt, there was no doubt that the government would have just as strong of a reaction to him. Maybe even a stronger one, depending on what Tommy was capable of. It wasn’t unheard of for top-ranked heroes to be assigned missions to detain overly powerful individuals, regardless of their criminal records.

Wilbur drew in a sharp breath as he tried to steady his racing heart. That still wasn’t enough to answer all of his questions, but it was already starting to paint an unpleasant picture of what could be to come.

“*Fuck*,” he hissed out, planting his hands on the kitchen island as his head hung low.

Tommy’s laugh was ragged and sharp, nothing like his boisterous cackles or stifled giggles that escaped him when they played video games or made fun of Phil like normal brothers did at home. “Yeah, pretty much,” Tommy agreed quietly, making Wilbur’s heart ache.

Wilbur swallowed hard and pushed on. “But why you? What are your powers?”

“Nullification, erasure or whatever you want to call it,” Tommy replied, tone far more brittle than the casual way he tried to say it. “I am the universal off switch for every powered person I can touch. Seeing as Schlatt is the guy currently making a universal power *boosting* drug using another teenager’s blood, I imagine he found the idea of making a power *removing* drug pretty interesting too.”

Wilbur bit the side of his tongue as he thought of a different kid, with windswept brown hair and resigned green eyes as he tried to explain why his life amounted to a single hard drive's worth of information. Wilbur had completely forgotten about Haywire's warning about Schlatt's intention to create the second drug.

"Oh *Tommy*," Wilbur breathed as he suddenly dragged the boy into a crushing hug. Of course, Tommy just sank into it like he had before, burying his face in Wilbur's shoulder. "Why didn't you say anything?"

It was a stupid question, Wilbur knew better than most why you wouldn't trust someone else to talk about your powers, but it was just *so much*. How long had Tommy known? Did he truly understand how much danger he was in? Of *course* he did; he almost died the night Whisper and Nix found him! Schlatt had been looking for Tommy for months and nobody had noticed! They just wrote off the little things until Tommy felt the need to take matters into his own hands and *leave-*

"I just wanted to keep you guys safe," Tommy whispered into his shirt, "how was I supposed to know?"

We should have told you, Wilbur thought, though he didn't dare say it out loud. He still had yet to properly admit *it*, but Tommy wasn't stupid. He knew Whisper's powers the second they met at the hospital and he had lived with Wilbur for months. If he hadn't put two and two together yet, he would sooner than later.

He adjusted his hold around the boy and turned to bury his nose in the mess of blonde curls with a small shake of his head. "I'm so sorry, Toms."

"Me too."

Neither of them made any move to break the hug and Wilbur couldn't help but be grateful for it. For every question that had been answered even more questions took their place but he couldn't bring himself to really consider it all yet.

This felt like a moment they had both been needing for a long time.

The sudden sound of the building's fire alarm system going off had them both flinching and holding on tighter for a second.

The following sounds of screaming and gunfire had them both suddenly springing into action, panic shooting through Wilbur's veins like a shot of adrenaline.

It seemed like their time was already up.

CW/TW Summary: Schlatt continues to choke Quackity against the wall as Tubbo begs him to stop. Schlatt refuses and says that Tubbo made his choice and there's no changing it. He jeers at Tubbo, blaming him as he continues to choke Quackity. Quackity tries to stab Schlatt's arm but his knife breaks. Schlatt tells Tubbo this is a lesson and that he is done playing nice. He says if Tubbo behaves he might "consider bringing him back" before finishing the job and killing Quackity.

Hey guys, it's been... a bit, huh? I had to take a little extra time to process everything but I promise I'm still seeing this through to the end.

From the get-go, I want to say: Rest in Power, Technoblade.

I don't really have the word to express how I feel about his passing, but I'll just say that he was such an inspiration and we'll never forget him. Technoblade was a massive supporter of fan content and I intend to remember him by continuing to create in his memory.

That said, this fic and many of the character arcs have been planned out from the very start and I won't be making any major changes to his dsmp character's counterpart in this. This is angst with a happy ending; unfortunately, we're in the heart of the angst, and people will make bold choices and mistakes, including this version of Techno. I've promised a happy ending from the start and there will be one, but that's just the little piece I had to say on the matter.

That said, yay! Tommy and Wilbur- oh shit they can't catch a fucking break, huh?

And as always, leave a kudos and comment if you've read this far, I always love to hear how people are feeling even if it's just screaming into the void! Take care of yourselves <3

Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Whisper protects Tommy.

Tubbo sees something he's not supposed to.

Chapter Notes

Welcome back to the shit show two, electric boogaloo!

First off I'd like to thank my beloved editor and my new beta reader Newt for helping me clean up this chapter! It's a long haul and they were both super awesome for helping me get through it <3

SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT: I will no longer be putting summaries of TW/CW stuff at the end of the chapters. If you read the tags and this far into the story, you know what you're getting into. I'll still tag chapters with TW/CW's but no more summaries!

That said, thank you to everyone that left kudos and comments! they are the life blood that keeps me going <3. Now, back to the madness :)

Chapter TW/CW: Mind Control, Slight Torture, Brief Descriptions of Dead Bodies and Side Character Death

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy was going to lose it.

Or maybe he already had. Or maybe he was currently in the middle of losing it. He honestly had no idea anymore.

Some part of him was still screaming at him for telling Wilbur. It was absolutely bloody fucking *bonkers* to trust a hero with one of the secrets that could land him in prison or worse for the rest of his life. It didn't matter if it was Wil, he was *Whisper*.

Tommy was Theseus, Wilbur was Whisper. Simple as that. They weren't meant to trust each other.

Except Wilbur trusted him. Tommy had continued to push the man despite his obvious discomfort with the questions and veiled accusations thrown his way. Tommy pushed and

prodded, expecting nothing in return only to get the cold, terrifying truth.

And somehow instead of scaring him off as it should have, he immediately felt some of the walls in his heart start to crumble.

An adult in his life, someone he considered *family*, flat out *trusted him* with something that important. Wilbur trusted Tommy enough to tell him his powers even when he thought it might scare Tommy away.

That meant more to Tommy than words could even begin to describe.

But one act of unconditional love wasn't quite enough to erase Tommy's lifetime of neglect. So even as he fought with himself to trust Wilbur, to just fucking get it off his chest and ask for help like Drista told him to, he was still guarded. But honestly, how could Tommy *not* trust the guy that offered to help him hide a body and then lecture him later instead of turning him in?

So as insane as it was, Tommy told him. He told Wilbur about his powers and Schlatt, and for some reason, *Wilbur* was the one that apologized to *him*.

Everything about the situation felt uncomfortably surreal, from the slightly burnt eggs that were just so damn Wilbur, despite the situation, to the crushing pressure of the embrace Wilbur dragged him into. Tommy must have been hallucinating because it was all too good to be true.

And then the alarms and gunfire started up like a cold slap of reality.

Go figure, huh?

The second the gunfire became audible both of them were rushing to prepare.

Tommy could only assume Wilbur was sprinting towards the bedroom, with only a stay put order directed at Tommy, so that he could get his hero gear. Tommy, of course, did not stay put and made a beeline for his gear bag still waiting by the door.

Still, for all the years Tommy had been doing the vigilante gig, he had never had to gear up while the firefight had already started nearby. Part of him almost wished he *had* done this before just so his body would calm the hell down. But, as it was, he was stressed enough to accidentally fumble with the velcro straps of the Kevlar vest wrapped around his chest.

He was also so tuned in to the approaching sounds of shouting and shooting that he didn't hear Wilbur return until the man was beside him, already reaching to help Tommy secure the other side of the vest.

And— well, it was one thing to know in your mind that someone you knew was a hero.

You could make assumptions about what it would look like and how you would feel about it all you wanted but it went out the window the second you looked that person dead in the eye while they were in full costume.

Or almost full costume in Wilbur's case. He offered the teen a tight smile that betrayed his fear and concern all too well, which was so *Wilbur* that it almost made Tommy want to punch him. Whisper's iconic half face mask and goggles were both dangling from his left wrist, swinging with his movements as he made quick work of fastening the vest around Tommy.

"Do I even want to know why you have a custom fitted vest for your scrawny ass?" Wilbur joked, already moving back into the kitchen to violently dig through the drawers and cabinets, obviously looking for something.

Tommy couldn't help but laugh at the ridiculousness of the situation as he stalked back towards the couch to retrieve the Endwalker jacket. "Probably not," he called back, struggling as one of the sleeves bunched up with the blue sweater and armguard on Tommy's forearm.

He turned back to find Wilbur leaning over the counter, scribbling furiously at a pad of blue sticky notes with one hand and struggling to hook his goggles over his head with the other. Tommy returned to his gear bag, pulling out the plain black airsoft mask instead of Spade's heavy helmet.

He tried and failed to hide his flinch as gunfire set off once again, definitely on the same floor as them now.

Wilbur finished writing, tugging off the single note and pausing when he turned to Tommy. Tommy tried not to shift too awkwardly under his gaze, glancing down at the airsoft mask in his hands and back up at Wilbur.

Their chances of survival dramatically increased in Tommy's mind the second Wilbur revealed his powers, and even more so when he made the Whisper connection, but that didn't mean they were safe.

This was even more dangerous than a vigilante patrol, because the vigilantes were smart about their targets. Tommy and the rest of the teens never did missions like this, never took on a situation where death was such a high probability. The last few times Tommy was in a situation like this he had been wholly unprepared and only survived because of outside intervention and sheer dumb luck.

He would need a lot of dumb luck to make it out of this on his own, but he had Wilbur now. *Whisper*. A pro-level hero that hid in the shadows and bent the world's will to his own. Whisper, who was trained to face death in every fight and come out on top.

Heroes still die, just like vigilantes do. Almost every day now that Trigger was so prevalent.

Tommy wasn't sure what he was gonna do if Wilbur died trying to get him out of this building.

"It's gonna be okay, Tommy," Wilbur promised with a genuine smile.

"Okay," Tommy agreed weakly, at a loss for anything else to say.

He wished he could have allowed himself to really believe it, but a small voice in his head that sounded like Tubbo reminded him that expecting the worst meant you were never disappointed.

Wilbur crossed the room to his side in a few long strides, taking one of Tommy's hands and gently placing the folded blue note in his gloved hand. "This is the address of the safehouse I want you to go to and wait for me," he said. "It's one of Phil's, with no association with the hero agency or anything like it, so no one will know to look for you or question why you're there."

Oh. Tommy did *not* like where this was going. "I'm not leaving you on your Wil, there's gotta—"

He couldn't help but flinch at the crashing sound of a fist banging against the front door. "*We know you're in there Thomas! Just surrender and nobody else has to get hurt!*" a gruff voice called through the door, muffled by the wood and sound of dozens of heavy boots moving in the hall beyond.

Somehow Tommy thought that was a lie. Shocking, right?

"It's going to be *fine*," Wilbur stressed, letting go of Tommy's hand to finally secure his mask over the lower half of his face. "This is literally my job, so just follow my lead and I promise it'll all work out."

Tommy hid the way his face fell at the word *promise* by tugging his own mask over his face. He made a point of not pulling the hood up so his hair was still completely visible. No point in giving anyone a reason to think he was anyone but Tommy at this point. They didn't need any more problems added to this mess.

"Please don't make promises you can't keep," Tommy couldn't help but say.

The door slammed again as the man shouted something else, but neither of the brothers were looking at anything but each other. Still, Tommy repressed another flinch and Wilbur sighed.

"Does that mask have any filters in it?" he asked instead of taking the promise back.

Tommy shook his head and Whisper nodded, opening a pouch at his side and retrieving three small metallic pellets. "Okay, just hang back for a minute until I tell you it's safe. You good with heights?"

Tommy resisted the urge to snort and nodded. One didn't just spend all their early teen years jumping between five-story buildings for fun if they were afraid of a little open air.

"Okay, then our current plan is to get you onto one of the roofs of a lower building nearby. You make a break for that safehouse and I'll take out all the baddies here, sound good?"

"Sounds stupid," Tommy grumbled in protest, "that's a lot of baddies Wil."

He could see Wilbur smile in the way that the corners of his eyes crinkled and his eyebrows raised slightly. "Well, good thing I'm a whole lot a hero," he joked just as the door practically

flew off its hinges in a burst of crackling, splintering wood.

Despite himself, Tommy forced his fighting instincts down and fell back to the kitchen, letting Whisper take the lead as a few men forced their way into the apartment.

To his surprise, instead of Whisper's commands forcing the intruders back, he heard the sounds of a short scuffle followed by three small explosive charges setting off and more unfamiliar shouting.

He dropped into a crouch and leaned around the corner just in time to watch as Whisper flipped a man in full riot gear over his shoulder and out into the hallway. More orders were barked between the small army outside of the apartment but it all fell silent with a single word from Whisper.

“Freeze.”

The command slid off Tommy's shoulders like ice down the back of his shirt. Either Wilbur wasn't worried about Tommy obeying the command as well, or he was using the teen's powers to their advantage. Either way, the power slid harmlessly off Tommy's mind while every figure in the hall came to a dead stop.

“Tommy,” Wilbur called, his voice strained as though he were holding something very heavy.

The scene that greeted Tommy in the hall was one that would linger in his mind every time he and Wilbur bickered for years to come.

Nearly thirty men stood frozen in place, straining against invisible bonds that made every muscle in their bodies shake with the effort. At the centre of it all stood Whisper, face completely hidden by his mask and goggles and looking unphased as a few of his victims even cried out, in pain or frustration Tommy didn't know.

The only thing that betrayed Whisper's own exertion was the slight shake in his voice as he turned to Tommy.

“Go to the far stairwell and wait for me while I deal with this. You should have enough of a vantage from the landing to see anybody coming up from below but you'll have to keep an ear out for anyone above,” he said, tone having slipped fully into the familiar cadence of a hero at work, steady, sure and reassuring despite the circumstances. “If any gas leaks from under the doors just don't breathe it, it's the tranquillizing gas I'm using to knock these guys out. Shout if you run into any trouble.”

Tommy nodded mutely, somewhat falling back into his own rhythm as a vigilante. Slowly drawing the collapsible baton from his belt he made his way towards the other end of the hall where the emergency stairwell was.

As he passed, some of the men's heads jerked to follow his movement until Whisper's next command rang clear through the silence. ***“Eyes forward boys,”*** he ordered, making every eye immediately snap back toward the hero. Despite how Tommy's stomach flipped, he couldn't help but feel a little grateful to not be the sole target of attention.

He didn't let himself look back before pushing open the heavy door to the stairwell landing, not wanting any more nightmare material of Wilbur being quite possibly the most terrifying hero Tommy had ever seen in action. The Blade and Dream could knock out as many muggers with one hit as they liked, it would never compare to watching an entire squad of goons in body armour and ski masks fall to their knees in front of Whisper's lone figure with just a few words.

Of course, the second he pushed out onto the landing he was met with the barrel of an assault rifle to his head.

"Don't make this any harder than it has to be kid," the man said, too quiet to be heard from the hall. Behind Tommy the door swung shut with a heavy sound, trapping him in the stairwell with the mercenary and cutting them off from Whisper's protection.

Fantastic.

Tommy scoffed because it was better than being visibly scared. "You can't kill me, last I checked Schlatt wants me alive."

"Check again," he grunted. "Bounty's dead or alive, it's a little less money but a lot less trouble to bring you in cold."

Ah, now wasn't *that* fantastic. Bounty hunters, not Schlatt's men. That explained how he kept running into so many wackos with strange skill sets trying to capture him throughout the week.

Not great that they were okay with killing him, in Tommy's humble opinion. If someone was gonna experiment on him, he wasn't sure he was really okay with giving them his corpse to work with. It was just wrong on so many levels.

Tommy didn't bother to tell the hunter his opinion on the matter, instead, he ducked under the rifle faster than the man anticipated. Was the bounty hunter well trained? Tommy would, unfortunately, have to say yes as he quickly recovered, trading out his heavy gun for a taser. Tommy barely had time to dodge.

But was he prepared to be taking on a fully trained vigilante in single combat while standing dangerously close to the edge of the landing and the top of the stairs leading down? Judging by how easy it was to hook one of the man's ankles and shoulder check his down said stairs, no, no he had not been prepared for that.

The clattering of heavy riot gear and its owner tumbling head over heels down the concrete stairs was drowned out by the deafening round of gunfire that came from the floor above. Tommy's heart raced as he ducked closer to the doorway to avoid the artillery spray.

Not a second later the heavy door next to him was shoved open, bringing with it a cloud of tranquillizing gas and one eerily calm hero. Tommy held his breath even as the door swung shut again, cutting off the worst of the noxious cloud.

“Freeze,” Whisper commanded again, the order once again rolling off of Tommy’s mind like oil over water.

The effect was immediate, the sound of heavy gear and weapons on the landing above going silent and the pained grunts from the next landing below suddenly cutting off.

Whisper’s gaze turned on him, eyes looking slightly unfocused through his goggles, but still attentive as he scanned Tommy for injuries.

Tommy internally grimaced as he forced himself to relax. *It’s just Wilbur*, he thought, trying to keep himself from panicking under the hero’s gaze.

That’s motherfucking Wilbur! His panicked mind argued. *What the fuck!*

“You good?”

Tommy blinked back to himself and nodded mutely. He belatedly realized should probably be talking more, but something about the mask and gear put his brain into Theseus™ mode, making speaking really not the move for his scattered brain.

Whisper let out a trembling sigh and nodded in return. “Stay put, I just gotta deal with the guys upstairs,” he said before turning, effortlessly taking the stairs two at a time.

The lack of a struggle before the sound of armoured bodies hitting the floor was incredibly unnerving. At least when The Blade did it there was screaming or swearing or *something*. Tommy of all people would know what it was like to fight—

Though on second thought, Tommy really didn’t want to think about The Blade right now.

Tommy just wanted to go home now that he was with Wilbur. He was so fucking tired of this bullshit and just wanted someone to promise to solve all his problems for him and let him sleep for a fucking week straight.

He also hated that when Whisper reappeared he could already read the lines of fatigue in the way he moved. He had never known a hero well enough to know how they were feeling just by watching their body language.

Except for The Blade, his mind supplied unhelpfully. *It’s what made him such a good sparring partner—*

Nope! None of that, shut up now.

“You gonna be okay?” Tommy asked to distract himself as he followed Whisper down the next flight of stairs to where the man Tommy kicked was still frozen on the floor.

Whisper glanced over his shoulder with a raised brow. “Me? Of course, this is literally my job, Toms.”

He scowled slightly under his mask. He was pretty sure it wasn’t in his usual job description, actually. Whisper was a reconnaissance and ambush hero, not the kind that regularly took on

small armies by himself.

Though, it wasn't like Tommy would be much help in that department if he stayed. Theseus was much the same, waiting for the perfect moment to strike and end the fight. The largest group Tommy could confidently take on was maybe five or six men at once. Preferably unarmoured men without assault weapons.

Still, it was obvious that using his powers at this level was already taking its toll on Whisper. The fucking dumbass probably still had a hangover to boot, but Tommy didn't have any viable counterarguments to the current plan of making a break for the safehouse alone.

They stopped at the landing as Whisper leaned down to grab the collapsed mercenary by the front of his bulletproof vest, hauling him up and slamming his none too gently into the wall. The man grunted but made no moves to protest the rough treatment, probably still caught under Whisper's powers.

"Now, we can either do this the easy way or the hard way," Whisper told the merc, his voice deathly calm. "Just answer a few questions and I'll knock you out for a nice little nap."

Tommy bit his lip under his mask, turning to watch the landing and stairs below them for any more men. He wasn't going to judge Whisper's interrogation methods, considering what he had been doing to Hellcat's goons all week, but that didn't make it any less uncomfortable to watch.

There was something so wrong about having to watch Wilbur hurt someone.

"Fuck— off," the mercenary spat out, his voice incredibly strained.

"Tell me," Whisper commanded, a strange quality in his voice as his powers flared, ***"how many men entered the building with you?"***

The man was silent for all of five tense seconds before he let out a muffled cry of pain, violently shaking his head. "T—twenty-four!" he yelped. "Twenty-five man team! We were just doin' it for the m-money! 133k each if we botch it and kill the kid, 400k if we bring him in alive!"

Despite not wanting to watch Whisper's powers at work, Tommy couldn't help the way his head shot back to the pair. If his basic maths wasn't failing him— "There's a *ten million dollar bounty* on me!?" he yelped as the numbers fell into place in his head.

The mercenary nodded emphatically, his breathing quick and laboured. "It's been increasing by a million every day you're not captured but any higher than ten mill and we figure he'll just hire a private contractor." Tommy watched nervously as Whisper's grip visibly tightened on the man's vest, making him shrink back. "All of us failed to get to you before because of your powers, but we figured to just cut the losses and team up using gear instead! My fault for forgetting how much of a slippery little shit you are," he said with a manic laugh.

If he had anything else left to say, it was lost as Whisper suddenly slammed him back against the wall with enough force that his head fell limp against his chest. ***"Sleep,"*** Whisper

commanded before dropping him with little fanfare, leaving the mercenary to slide back to the ground with a dull thump.

The air between them was utterly still for a moment.

“Fucking hell,” Whisper hissed as he moved to stand with Tommy at the top of the next set of stairs.

Tommy nodded dully, brain suddenly moving like molasses as he tried to process the *ten million dollar* bounty on his head. “Fifteen guys in the hall and four in the stairwell makes a team of six waiting between here and the ground floor,” he sighed. “Not too bad if the cops are already on their way.”

“Since when are you so good at maths?” Whisper asked, Wilbur’s teasing lit in his voice.

Tommy couldn’t help the small smile that tugged at his lips. “Fuck you, I’m great at maths. Fuckin’ the *best* honestly, nobody can compare to my sheer genius of *counting mercenaries*.”

Wilbur barked out a genuine laugh at that, shaking his head as he started down the stairs. “Of course Tommy, how could anyone comprehend that brilliance of calculating bounties on their own head.”

He snorted, trying to relish the moment of calm as he followed close behind. “Glad that we’re in agreement then.”

Wilbur huffed fondly but quickly fell silent as they quietly moved down the stairs to a lower floor. That was fine though, Tommy wasn’t sure if he really liked it when the line between Whisper and Wilbur blurred like that banter had.

He just didn’t want to think about all the heroes he was sure he met in the last few months of civilian life. Or mostly one in particular.

They stopped on the floor where the landing was labelled with a large six, Whisper using hand signals to tell Tommy to hang back a second. Once again he couldn’t stop his vigilante training from bleeding through as he nodded back silently and readied his baton.

Whisper cleared the floor almost immediately, silently signalling for Tommy to follow him out into the floor’s hall. They crept through the eerily silent hall, the carpet muffling their steps and the fluorescent light making Tommy feel exposed until they reached the large window at the end of the hall.

Tommy squinted through the gloom at the rooftop of a smaller building only one floor and a small alley apart from their current station.

“So,” Whisper started with an awkward clap of his gloved hands, “when I asked if you were good with heights—”

“I’ve made bigger jumps,” Tommy cut in, frowning as he took in the alley between the buildings and noted a small group of men gathered in the dark.

“You’ve– *jumps*?” Whisper stuttered, still seemingly unaware of the problem that awaited on the ground outside. “I– Prime, I was going to shoot you a grapple line, not– why the hell were you making jumps like this?”

Tommy sighed and shook his head, knowing that the conversation was going to get them nowhere at this moment. “I don’t think this group was the only ones that caught wind of me holing up here,” he said instead, nodding at the men in the alley. “You should just come with me, otherwise you could get caught in the middle of a pissing contest with every other merc in the city in the lobby.”

Whisper studied the group for a long moment, his expression still hidden by the mask and goggles. After a moment he sighed in return. “There’s no way they won’t notice this window breaking even if we don’t use explosives,” he said. “If you’re gonna have any chance of getting out of here, I have to stay back to at least slow them down.”

“No.”

Wilbur's sigh was harsher this time. “Tommy, I'm not having this argument with you.”

“But Wil– you’re– You’re not Techno, Whisper,” Tommy grit out, the near admission already feeling like ash on his tongue. “You’re not–”

“Oh I am *well* aware that I’m not fucking Techno,” Wilbur cut him off with a kind of poison Tommy had never heard in his voice. Tommy recoiled slightly as Wilbur barreled on. “Everybody’s been making a point to fucking remind me of that this week despite the fact that I’m not *trying* to be like him. I. Can. Do. This. So just let me help you so we can meet up at the safehouse and *maybe* have half a chance at having a nice Thanksgiving dinner on Thursday, okay?”

Let me help you.

Tommy wasn’t sure anybody but Wilbur had ever said those words to him so many times in one day. Much less his entire life.

Thanksgiving dinner sounded like something from a different fucking *life*. He hadn’t celebrated since he lived with Vince and Victoria Sheppard. But maybe, just *maybe*, it wouldn’t be so bad to try and overwrite the experience with some newer, fonder, memories.

“Okay,” he agreed nervously. “But if you die, I’ll fucking kill you, you bastard.”

He could almost hear the smile in his brother's voice as he nodded, “I can live with that. Now,” he reached into a pouch on his belt, retrieving four small metal disks and planting them in a square shape on the glass in front of them, “are you *positive* you can make that jump on your own?”

“Of course, I’m not a helpless child,” Tommy said, “I’m a big fucking man who can make his own jumps–”

“I’m *serious* , Tommy,” Wilbur cut in with steel in his voice. Tommy was pretty sure he was just trying to hide how nervous he was. Wilbur had no reason to believe Tommy could make that jump aside from the vaguest of clues that Tommy’s gear gave him.

“I can make the jump,” he said with as much honesty as he could.

Whisper nodded. “Good, then take these and wait for my signal to blow the window,” he said, holding out a small remote detonator and an earpiece in his gloved palm.

Tommy gingerly took both, cramming the comm in his ear with practiced ease. It was similar to the ones that Tubbo made for the vigilante network, and he was pleasantly surprised when double tapping it brought it to life with the same cheerful beeping tone.

If Whisper found his knowledge of the comm odd, he said nothing. He drew Tommy’s attention again by planting his hand on the teen’s shoulder with a firm squeeze.

“I will meet you at the safehouse,” he assured firmly, shaking Tommy’s shoulder in a painfully familiar way that didn’t match with the picture of the hero in front of him.

“What if something happens?” he asked, trying to ignore the part of him that couldn’t help but imagine every way this could go wrong.

“Signal me on the comm,” Wilbur said, gesturing to his own ear with his free hand. “I promise I’ll always come back for you.”

Tommy resisted the urge to bite at the skin of his lips. “Stop making promises you can’t keep.”

The firm hand on his shoulder was suddenly dragging him in until he was wrapped in the hero’s arms, the hug bleeding with familiarity despite all the body armour and gear between them.

“*Always*,” he promised, like it was just that easy. Like it wasn’t the word Tommy had waited his whole damn life to hear a family say to him.

“Okay,” he agreed quietly.

He told himself only agreed so easily because didn’t want possibly their last conversation to be an argument. It definitely wasn’t because some sad little part of him wanted it to be true, wanted to believe him. They could just fight about it again in a few hours anyway.

Probably.

They could have stayed there for the rest of Tommy’s— probably short— life and it would have been enough, in that moment, but their hug was broken by the muffled sounds of voices in the stairwell.

“Wait for my signal,” Whisper said, drawing away with a final squeeze of assurance on Tommy’s shoulder.

“Don’t die,” Tommy hissed after him as he crept back towards the stairwell door.

Whisper turned back one last time before shooting him a double thumbs up and vanishing through the door. Not a minute later the sounds of shouting and gunfire were cut off as soon as they started, leaving Tommy to assume Whisper had once again made quick work of whoever was trying to creep up on them.

He turned back to look at the alley below, finding even more people were gathering. It seemed to be two distinct groups in opposition, but not yet fighting. Word of Tommy’s whereabouts must have got around fast.

Fantastic.

He eyed the explosive charges stuck to the glass with a sinking feeling.

He’d wait for Whisper’s signal, trusting that the other had a plan. Less because he was a hero and more because Tommy was tired of not feeling like he could trust his brother.

They could do this.

All he had to do was wait for the signal.

“What’s the password to this thing? And don’t pretend like you don’t know, you’re a slippery little shit there’s no way you don’t have it memorized.”

Tubbo dutifully ignored the sound of Schlatt’s voice, his attention morbidly fixated on Quackity’s cooling body on the floor next to him.

If Schlatt hadn’t immediately cut him free of the chair just to teach him another "lesson" about crying, he would have had more tears to spare for his friend. But as it was he sat silent, uncaring of the blood and saline drying on his own face after the beating from his father.

Tubbo had gone soft. He was so used to Schlatt’s empty threats that he forgot they were a mercy. A mercy he threw out the window by betraying the man and a weakness that was turned against him when he was too blinded by rage to see it coming.

Tubbo was too mad at Quackity to take pity on him without a fight, and because of that Quackity was dead.

“Helloooo,” Schlatt called across the room, obviously trying to get Tubbo’s attention.

“Tubbster, I need the password to his phone in the next ten minutes. So maybe just tell me? I’m getting pretty tired of wailin’ on ya, it’s just sad at this point.”

“Then kill me,” Tubbo huffed, no real anger or life to it. Just a simple statement, like it was neither here nor there.

Schlatt’s replying snort was followed by the sound of his dress shoes on the concrete as he crossed the room towards Tubbo.

“Nah,” he said, just as casual in turn. He crouched down next to Tubbo and Quackity’s body, making the boy draw his knees closer to his chest reflexively. “How about you just give me the phone password and I won’t have one of the doctors paralyze you so you can’t run away anymore, hm? That sound fair to you?”

Tubbo couldn’t help but shudder at the thought. It wasn’t the first time Schlatt had made that threat, but it was the first time he actually believed it might be an option.

Schlatt was done messing around, Quackity’s glassy eyes were proof of that.

Instead of spitting curses or bursting into tears or even grumbling about how, no that didn’t really seem like a fair deal, Tubbo just wordlessly held out his hand for the device.

Schlatt huffed, slipping Quackity’s personal phone into his hand without a word and leaning over his shoulder to watch as Tubbo pulled up the number pad.

Contrary to Schlatt’s belief, Quackity wasn’t stupid enough to let Tubbo watch as he unlocked his phone, most of the time using a face ID or carefully doing it out of sight. It seemed though that even the face ID was off-put by Quackity’s blue, dead face, so Schlatt had resorted to getting Tubbo to do it.

Still, just because Quackity was careful about his password didn’t mean he was careful about what he said around Tubbo. Tubbo knew enough personal information to give it an honest try, and at this point, another beating wasn’t worth protecting a dead man.

He knew Schlatt wouldn’t kill him over it if he couldn’t open the phone. But there were obviously worse things than death.

On the fifth failed try the phone vibrated angrily as it locked him from trying again for one minute.

“If you mess it up again and it locks you out for five, I’m putting you in a cell instead of your room,” Schlatt threatened casually over his shoulder, making Tubbo’s grip on the device tighten.

He thought through any possibly important dates that Quackity might have told him and came up with two options.

March 1st or July 19th.

By the time the lockout opened, Tubbo stared at the keypad, fairly certain of the answer. Ace had known FireBrand for longer, after all.

The phone immediately unlocked, taking him to the last thing Quackity had opened, his messages to someone with the initials KJ and a clock emoji next to it.

KJ: You sure about this?

Q: I can't leave the kid alone because of my fuck ups.

I've dealt with Schlatt for years, I'll be fine

KJ: Okay fine, but don't hesitate to call me if you need help.

Sap and I would rather have you alive and a failure then dead and a hero

Q: I know. I love you

KJ: love you too, be safe

Tubbo suddenly felt like he was gonna be sick.

Schlatt scoffed in annoyance, obviously having read the texts as well. "Kay cool, what's the password?" he said, quickly snatching the device from Tubbo's hand.

"March first," Tubbo answered miserably, closing his eyes and leaning his weight into the wall beside him. He didn't want to look at Quackity's body anymore.

"March first? What's so important about that?"

"S' fiancé's birthday," Tubbo nearly whispered, his stomach twisting painfully at the thought.

What had Tubbo done?

Schlatt's huff of annoyance was covered by the sound of the heavy doors squeaking on their hinges as they were pushed open, followed by the sounds of many pairs of footsteps.

Tubbo refused to open his eyes again, even at the rustle of fabric beside him as Schlatt stood.

“Oh good, I see you’ve all met then,” Schlatt said in his classic businessman voice, clapping his hands together. “Make all these trade offs quicker, yeah?”

“Holy shit, is that *Ace*?” a familiar woman’s voice nearly interrupted, making Tubbo blink his eyes open in confusion.

His suspicions were immediately confirmed as he was met with the four faces he expected and two more he recognized.

The Amigops, Valkyrae, Corpse, Sykkuno and Toast all stared down at him and Quackity’s body with varying expressions of shock, confusion and curiosity. The fifth villain standing slightly apart from their group, The Handler, looked mildly impressed but mostly bored as he shoved his hands in his pockets turning to Schlatt expectantly.

The final familiar face looked absolutely devastated as he stared down at Quackity’s body, eyes wide with shock. Spectre, one of Ace’s closest allies and Quackity’s best friends.

Spectre shouted something that was muffled by the cloth gag in his mouth and violently struggled from where Corpse and Sykkuno held him in place by his arms.

If Tubbo felt guilty before, he didn’t even have words to describe what this was like.

“Quiet down or you’re next,” Schlatt snapped at the distraught hero, turning Quackity’s phone over in his hand as he made his way towards the desk still at the back wall.

“I’d rather you didn’t do that,” the Handler said with a yawn. “My plan won’t exactly work without him.”

Schlatt chuckled darkly at that and Tubbo couldn’t help but curl in on himself a bit more.

“Yeah, well, considering how many of those dumb fucks keep losing the kid no matter how high I raise the bounty, it seems like you might regrettably be my last hope. Catch,” he warned before tossing Quackity’s phone in their direction.

The Handler caught it with ease, clicking the power button and frowning at the lock screen. “Password?”

“Tubbo?”

Oh.

Oh shit.

They needed Quackity’s phone for a plan to get ahold of Tommy.

He— Tubbo couldn’t just *give* it to them if Schlatt already forgot.

He glanced at Spectre, then Schlatt, then back to Spectre. The hero’s eyes widened as he realized what Tubbo was thinking and shook his head, though Tubbo wasn’t sure if he was trying to discourage him from telling or stop him from resisting.

Schlatt only tolerated Tubbo's silence for a moment before he sighed. "*Tubbo*," he repeated, a hard warning in his tone.

"I already told you," Tubbo protested weakly, trying to hide the way every muscle in his body tensed up.

"And?" Schlatt argued, the dangerous edge back in his tone. "I want you to tell me again."

Tubbo sat frozen for a moment, pure terror lacing its way up his spine at the thought of refusing Schlatt's orders now.

Schlatt wasn't fucking around anymore. Tubbo found himself fighting another wave of nausea as he remembered the many, many threats of things worse than death that were on the table if Tubbo kept resisting.

He glanced down at Quackity's body and back up at the Spectre, the hero still watching him with desperation in his monochromatic eyes.

It— it had to be worth it to keep Tommy safe. He'd take any punishment to keep his best friend out of Schlatt's hands.

The newfound determination must have shown on his face if Schlatt's sigh of disappointment was anything to go by.

"Let's go over this *one* more time, kid," Schlatt sighed. He slowly reached up to pull aside his suit jacket, revealing the gun holstered against his side. "When you do stupid shit, it's not *you* that's gonna take the fall—"

Tubbo's heart dropped to his stomach.

"No wait!"

"—it's gonna be *them*."

"Schlatt—"

"It's gonna be the heroes stupid enough to get in my way, or your favourite caretakers from over the years, or, hell, maybe even randos we pick up off the streets."

"Don't shoot him p— *please!* I'll—"

"You'll tell me?" Schlatt asked, sounding entirely unimpressed. "Just for some random hero?"

And—

It was a no-win scenario.

If he gave them access to the phone, he was just rolling over and letting them go after Tommy.

But if he said nothing, Spectre would die. Another person dead in the same day, because of Tubbo. The fifth or sixth or maybe even seventh body on his hands in the last few days. He had no idea if Sparklez or Ranboo survived their injuries after the warehouse. Crumb most certainly hadn't.

But then again, even if he held out, there were cameras in this room. They could figure out the password within the hour no matter what Tubbo did.

Still, the words tasted like a betrayal on his tongue. “Zero, three, zero, one,” he gritted out, eyes locked firmly on Spectre's panicked gaze. “March first, if that’s easier to remember. Now please Schlatt, don’t— don’t kill him.”

The defeat in Spectre's eyes outweighed the relief even as his shoulders relaxed slightly. It seems that as glad as he was to not get shot right now, he was more put off by Tubbo giving them what they wanted.

Instead of lowering the gun, Schlatt just laughed sharply. “Yeah, no,” he sneered, making the hero tense and whip to look at the gun again. “I already told you Tubbo, no more mister nice guy.”

Tubbo jerked his head to the side before Schlatt even pulled the trigger, unwilling to watch the hero's head get blown off.

He flinched at the deafening sound of the shot, barely registering the sound of Spectre's body hitting the floor over the sudden barrage of complaints from the other villains.

“—brains in my hair!” Valkyrae was grouching. “Not to mention that you could have hit Corpse—“

“Everybody out,” Schlatt ordered, ignoring their grievances and confusion.

Tubbo kept his eyes firmly shut as Schlatt’s iron grip tightened around his arm and hauled him to his feet. Schlatt all but shoved him and Tubbo stumbled blindly forward until a larger hand closed around his shoulder, steadying him.

“You still haven’t paid us,” Toast— or maybe it was Sykunno?— said evenly.

“Wait outside and keep the kid from going anywhere and I’ll get your payment in a minute,” he grumbled, dress shoes clacking against the hard floors as he moved to open the door for them.

“That’s not—“

“*Out!*” Schlatt roared.

Apparently, even some of the most trained villains in the city knew when it was best to listen to a crazy man with the gun.

Tubbo didn’t fight it as the cold hand on his shoulder steered him out the door.

He didn't open his eyes until he heard the heavy clang of the door shutting behind them, leaving them in the brightly lit hall outside.

He stared blankly at the floor, wishing that the tinnitus making his ears ring wasn't serving as a constant reminder of the gunshot that just killed the hero.

Because of him.

A low whistle gave him a new sound to focus on and drew his eye to The Handler, leaning against the wall across from the door.

"Your old man sure is a piece of work, huh?" He chuckled. "Remind me never to complain about my childhood again, he's got you *right* fucked up."

"Fuck you," Tubbo grumbled with no real venom in his voice.

The mercenary snorted but made no more comments.

Tubbo only noticed that the hand was still on his shoulder when it began to pull away a moment later. He tried to hide his flinch but probably did poorly if the look on Corpse's face was anything to go by.

He decided to ignore the way his shoulder still tingled where Corpse's hand had rested.

He didn't thank him either, but the villain made no comment.

The hall was just as it always was outside Schlatt's office, empty near the door but bustling with activity in both the adjoining halls as his men went about their assignments in the heart of the base.

Tubbo needed a phone but luckily it didn't take long for a friendly face to appear at the entryway of the hall.

"Silas!" He called out, making the guard's steps stutter.

He glanced over and made brief eye contact with Tubbo before turning to walk faster.

Tubbo sprinted to the end of the hall, ignoring the annoyed sounds of protests from the villains assigned to watch him.

He managed to snag Silas's arm and haul him into the quieter hall just as Toast stepped out of the twisting shadows behind him.

Tubbo shrugged off the villain's hand before slamming Silas into the wall none too gently.

"Give me your tablet," he demanded, hands curling tight into the straps of the man's Kevlar vest.

Silas laughed nervously, glancing between Tubbo and the villains gathered in the hall behind them. "I'm uh not supposed to be talking to you—"

“Give me your tablet before I take it from you.”

Silas visibly swallowed and Tubbo resisted the urge to grimace.

He liked Silas, he really did. As far as Schlatt’s personal guards went, he was by far the kindest to Tubbo. But he would always put Schlatt’s orders before anything to do with Tubbo and had proven it more than once.

“I can’t do—“

Tubbo didn’t even give him the chance to finish the sentence before releasing his best and punching him in the temple as hard and fast as he could.

The effect was nearly immediate as Silas’s knees gave out and he slumped to the floor with a pained groan, clutching at his now bruised head.

Tubbo went down with him, wrestling to get the man on his side and reaching for the tablet clipped to the back of his belt. Silas recovered faster than Tubbo thought he would, kicking Tubbo away just as he released the tablet’s clip, sending both him and the device sprawling.

“Tubbo—” he grunted, only to get cut off by Tubbo’s boot colliding with his face.

When a hand wrapped around his ankle and dragged him back away from the tablet, Tubbo gave up on it and turned back to his opponent. The sudden switch in attention gave him the upper hand as he tacked Silas back to the ground, straddling his chest to pin him down as Tubbo drew back his fist with the intention of punching the guard in the face until he stopped fighting.

However, his shoulder jerked painfully when a hand around his wrist arrested the motion. Tubbo glared at Silas’s pale look of fear for a moment before turning back to the villain holding his arm back.

“Fuck off,” he growled, trying to tug his arm away to no avail.

“I have a better idea,” Valkyrae sighed, turning her gaze to the man still pinned under Tubbo. “Silas, right?”

Silas somehow tensed further beneath Tubbo.

“Y–yeah?”

Valkyrae hummed. “Okay then.” Her eyes flashed with a red glow as she activated her powers. **“Silas, relax.”**

Tubbo jolted in surprise, turning to see as Silas’s eyes started to faintly glow red, mirroring Valkyrae’s as his entire body went slack. Horror curled in his gut as he saw the blank look settle in the man’s eyes and Tubbo realized what her powers were.

Mind control.

It was incredibly rare and incredibly dangerous, but not unheard of or very surprising.

Still, it was interesting. Most of the time people with mind control type powers had a hard time keeping it hidden, and even as Haywire he had never heard anything about Valkyrae having powers. She either didn't use it often or the requirements to make them work were complex enough to make it useless in a fight.

Footsteps scuffing against the floor drew his attention to Toast, who was bending down to retrieve the tablet from the floor a few feet away.

"What did you need the tablet for anyway?" he asked, eyeing Tubbo curiously as he turned the device over in his hands.

Tubbo glanced at Valkyrae, then the other villains then Toast again. No point in resisting this lot.

"To hack the cameras in Schlatt's office," Tubbo answered honestly. "If you give me the tablet I'll let you watch too. So long as you promise not to sell me out, of course."

Toast smirked as he traded looks with his comrades before glancing over at The Handler, who almost seemed to be sulking on the other side of the hall.

"That deal good for you, Handler?" Toast asked, fingers drumming against the tablet's thick case.

Tubbo made no move to protest the invitation, knowing the pros of having the handler on his side for the moment outweighed the cons. Still, they needed to do this sooner than later if they wanted to get anything useful before Schlatt returned with the Amigops' payment.

"Yeah, I'm feeling a bit nosey all things considered," The Handler answered as he pushed off the wall behind him. "Who pays 20k for a hero to be brought in alive only to shoot him before fulfilling the actual plan?"

"An alcoholic," Tubbo muttered bitterly as he pushed to his feet, earning a quiet snort from Corpse.

Toast handed off the tablet without a word as Tubbo shot one last look at Silas on the ground, still motionless aside from his shallow breaths.

It seemed like the effects of Valkyrae's powers were the exact opposite of Whisper's. Tubbo had only tried to resist the hero's command on the beach for a moment before it sparked a splitting headache and he relented to the hold. In contrast, Silas seemed completely relaxed, almost like he was high or in a trance.

The villains traded a few more quiet words but Tubbo blocked them out as he crack through the security systems protections to find the office camera feeds.

Once upon a time Schlatt had been pretty good at remembering the turn off the cameras and mics in his office when he was doing shady shit, but somewhere along the way either the alcohol or the cockiness made him stop. While in the long run that was very bad for Tubbo,

considering the overwhelming amount of evidence it captured of him willingly working with the villains, it was useful at the moment.

In only a few minutes he had the feed up and running, revealing a strange scene.

It seemed that Schlatt had officially lost it at first.

All of the furniture in the room had already been moved to the outer walls, leaving the centre of the floor clear aside from the large Persian rug that normally sat beneath the couch and coffee table set up. Now the rug had been thrown aside in favour of where Schlatt was attacking the floor with a can of white spray paint.

In one hand he held the can, marking strange symbols in a circular pattern around the centre of the room. In the other, he balanced an open book that he seemed to be consulting between symbols as he muttered to himself too low for the mics to pick up.

“What the fuck?” Corpse rumbled from where he had leaned to watch over Tubbo’s shoulder.
“The hell is he doing?”

“That’s...” Sykkuno started before trailing off slightly. “Is that—”

“A magic circle?” Toast finished, sounding just as bewildered.

Tubbo’s stomach dropped at the realization of what was happening.

It was supposed to be a myth. A theory. A power fantasy for a madman who wanted to be more than superhuman, to control the very fabrics of the universe using any means he could get his hands on.

That’s all Schlatt’s goals had ever been. To gain enough power in the world that it would bend to his will. The easiest way had always been through Tubbo’s powers, giving him the ability to pick and choose would be the most powerful. But he always wanted more. He wanted the ability to make people powerless too, hence his new obsession with capturing Tommy.

But he always dreamed of more, ranting to Tubbo for hours about ancient magics and libraries in the realm between life and death. About gods, about demons and potions masters. About books that could put the power of the universe in the palm of your hand.

“That’s why we’re doing this, all this training is for you to be the greatest. To create gods. ”

“But hey, if you behave for long enough then maybe I’ll consider bringing him back for you.”

Tubbo said nothing as the villains gathered about silently to watch the tablet. He was pretty sure they were talking to each other but the ringing in his ears was somehow louder. Or maybe it was his racing heartbeat that made it too hard to hear them.

Schlatt finished the circle with a final few flourishes before he slammed the book closed and tossed the can of paint aside.

Tubbo couldn't have looked away if he wanted to as Schlatt dragged Spectre's body to the centre of the circle.

His heart was in his throat as the scene burned itself into his memory. Watching with rapt attention as he memorized Schlatt's every move.

How he made sure the body's head pointed east.

How he retrieved a paper and a pen from his desk, scrawled something on it before cutting his palm and dripped exactly three drops of blood on the paper.

How he stood at the west side of the circle, paper in one hand and a lighter in the injured one.

Every nerve in Tubbo's body lit up when Schlatt lifted the paper, setting it aflame before dropping it into the circle.

The cameras all cut out the second it touched the floor, but Tubbo didn't need to see the ritual to feel the immense wave of dark magic radiating from the room.

It felt like Death was standing right next to him, though when he turned he saw nothing.

Still, he got the feeling that if she was there, she was fucking *pissed*.

A sudden sharp pain spiked behind his eyes and everything that followed was a blur.

He knew the Amigops were talking. He could hear their voices but couldn't retain the words. He felt hands on his shoulders, shaking him, tapping at his face, hauling him off the ground.

When had he sat down?

Then he was back in the office. There were fewer voices in here but more yelling. He swayed dangerously on his feet before something— Schlatt?— hit him and he collapsed.

Then the magic was back, more potent as he was in the room this time. It felt like Tubbo was suffocating, like its power was crawling down his throat to grip painfully at his racing heart and stab at his lungs as he gasped for air.

Somehow the cold, inhuman hand that settled on his shoulder was comforting instead of terrifying like it should have been.

He turned to meet Death's sad, lifeless gaze.

She offered him a tight smile that didn't quite reach her eyes and he somehow managed a single deep breath.

Then the magic was gone and the shouting returned, but this time it was a woman's voice.

Tubbo barely had time to register anything about the situation before he was slammed back against the ground, a weight settling heavily on his chest and pinning him to the ground.

He blinked groggily and green eyes met wild purple above him.

Purple eyes and messy purple hair streaked through with dried blood and strands of white that hadn't been there before.

Minx.

Tubbo had killed Minx.

And Schlatt just resurrected her.

But wait— if Schlatt resurrected Minx— where was Spectre?

Chapter End Notes

Happy one year of JOM!!!

It's been a wild ride and it's so satisfying to see things finally starting to come together to a peak now sooner than later! Thank you all for reading, no matter if you just started reading or if you've been here from the start I can't express how amazing it is to have *anyone* that reads and enjoys my writing, it's literally so cool.

Anyway I know I say this every time but it *actually* shouldn't be that long until the next update lmao. 29 is already written and edited and it has literally one of my favourite scenes to write in it so I'm very excited to get that to you in hopefully a couple weeks.

Thank you for reading and if you've made it this far make sure to leave a kudos and a comment. I'm sure there was plenty in this chapter worth yelling at me over and I'd love to hear it >:3

Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Tommy makes a break for the safehouse.

Techno and Dream go looking for their missing people.

Chapter Notes

Hello!! I'm doing something I should have been doing this whole time and linking FANART BECAUSE HOLY CRAP PEOPLE DREW ART (artists i'm so sorry I never linked before i'm a terrible author i love you)

[Theseus](#) by Red_Cray0ns on twitter

[Theseus, Whisper and the memorial](#) by granola-dot-jpeg on tumblr

[Schlatt and Styx](#) by killmebythebeach on tumblr

And [an old meme](#) from when I was on a break submitted by hewhodevoursbooks on tumblr

If you ever draw something for One Mistake and want me to see it either tag me directly or tag it with #JOMfanart because "one mistake" is a very common phrase and it will get lost in the tides of fallout boy quote posts. I am an artist, I love art, I literally think about these all the time y'all are so cool.

Other than that, no huge CW/TW's this week (finally). As always, thank you to my editor and my beta reader for helping me get this chapter done! And thank you all for reading, enjoy the chapter <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Now," Whisper's voice crackled in Tommy's ear, backed by the staticky sound of gunfire through the comm.

Tommy didn't hesitate to press the small remote detonator the hero had given him, backing up a few steps to watch as the charges against the glass blinked red three times before setting off simultaneously. The entire window cracked before shattering into a million tiny cubes of safety glass, sparkling in the dim city light just like the raindrops from the storm that blew its way inside the hall.

Did Tommy really like this plan? No, he couldn't say he did. So many things could go wrong for Wilbur if Tommy left, but a lot of things could go worse if he stayed. He knew that, but he didn't have to *like* it.

Though honestly by that logic he couldn't say that he really *liked* anything that has happened over the last week since he ran off. But how was he supposed to know that the family he was trying to protect were actually *heroes*? It's not like they ever bothered to mention it, just that he could "trust" them.

"Trust is something you have to give over time, and I'm willing to give you more and more of my trust as long as you are returning it, not breaking it. Sound fair?"

He couldn't help but glare slightly as he studied the man. "You promise it's not awful? I'm not gonna get kidnapped or have to call the cops on you once I know?"

Phil laughed weakly at that, "I promise you won't have to call the cops on me, it's not bad."

Tommy couldn't really decide whether or not this was awful yet.

He couldn't really blame Phil for not wanting to tell him then, if Tommy were almost anyone else then their identities wouldn't mean much. But he was Theseus, so the fact that he had been living with Whisper and, if he had to guess, Tempest and--

Nope, we're not thinking about that. We're running and jumping off a building onto a roof right now.

He wasn't gonna let himself think about Techno right now. He would rather not think about it ever, actually. Window. Roof. There was no time for anything else right now.

At the very least Tommy was thankful that sparring with Techno had helped him keep up his strength because even as it was he narrowly made the jump.

Everything felt like it was in slow motion the second his feet pushed off the edge of the building and he went weightless. He was about halfway through the jump when he realized that he either miscalculated the distance or didn't jump with enough force.

Still, as the roof below rapidly came up to meet him he did his best to make it work. Tommy angled himself enough that one leg and most of his body weight managed to hit the edge of the flat roof, sending a spike of pain shooting up to his hip. He didn't let the momentum stop though, carrying the fall through by pushing off with the leg that hadn't quite made it and forcing himself into a roll across the fine gravel of the rooftop.

He groaned in pain as he rolled to a stop, laying there for a moment until he was sure nothing was broken. Thankfully nothing seemed to scream out for his attention, only his right knee and hip protesting slightly as he sat up.

As far as fucked up jumps went, not the worst he'd ever had. At the very least he could still put enough weight on both legs to take off at a run towards the lower district where the safehouse was located.

Whatever Wilbur had done, it seemed that all the other mercenaries closing in on the building were thoroughly distracted, if the distant sounds of gunfire and shouting were anything to go by as he moved away from the scene.

The sudden sound of police sirens made him run faster, heedless of the rain and how his body protested every jump he made between rooftops. The last thing any of them needed was Tommy getting arrested while wearing mismatched vigilante gear.

And would it really be so bad if he fell?

Gods shut up brain, he cursed internally. *Not helpful.*

Tommy just needed to stop thinking right now.

He needed to not think about how Wilbur was fighting so many mercs all by himself. He needed to not think about how much his leg hurt. He needed to not think about how inviting the ground five stories below was starting to look or how he knew Techno's fighting style by heart before they even started to spar regularly.

He just needed to get to the safehouse in one piece and *then* he could have a proper breakdown. No Wilbur there looking at him with worry and just a little space to himself to... process? Would he even have enough time in his *life* to process all this bullshit?

No, probably not. Hell, there wasn't even a guarantee that he would still *have* a life worth processing after all this was over. The only guarantee he had right now was to run and to get to the safehouse.

His body went into autopilot, moving across the rooftops and into the lower district with practiced ease.

It was only when he dropped down from the rooftops to the network of alleys that he realized where he was. He was in the neighbourhood that Theseus was born in.

The neighbourhood where the memorial had been set up just a few months ago.

Tommy took a shaking breath as he dug into his jacket pocket to check the address on the sticky note Wilbur had left him with. He squinted at the smudged ink as the rain continued to pour down, drops soaking into the paper like tears.

The quickest way to the address would take him through that alley. He obviously could just take a slightly longer route but...

He had to see it again.

Of course, it shouldn't have been a surprise to find that the memorial was in shambles. It had been set up haphazardly against a chain link fence during the end of summer when the weather was still nice enough to leave candles and letters out in the open. Now, after so much time and a literal hurricane over the last couple of days, all that remained looked like wet trash flapping in the wind.

The banner had been ripped at one corner, turning it into a soaked flag that flapped violently in the strong winds. Most of the candles and picture frames were smashed, leaving a wide debris field of sparkling glass and mushy paper all across the sidewalk, in the gutter and even back past the fence into the alley. What few mementos that remained were those that had been tied to the fence but even they had seen better days.

All of the colourful ribbons and painted locks twisted in the wind just as the torn banner did, some of the colourful strips of fabric coming loose and flying off into the storm as Tommy stood and watched. His eyes were drawn to a once purple rabbit plushie with a red ribbon tied around its ear and for some reason, he burst out laughing.

Of *course* this was what Thesus's legacy had been reduced to.

Tommy laughed until he couldn't breathe, forcing him to take off his mask and gasp for air as the cold rain finally hit his face. Then he laughed some more until he was crying, and he kept laughing and sobbing until his knees hit the glass covered concrete. Then he *screamed*.

This was one of the poorest neighbourhoods in the city. Nobody would do anything but draw their curtains closed at the sound of someone screaming and that only made him cry harder.

He had made a difference once in places like this. He had been the one to help people that screamed in the night and made others believe that maybe it was worth looking out for each other.

And now he was nothing but a scared kid, running from danger into the unknown that could only hold more danger.

Tommy just wished it could go back to the way it was.

Back to when he knew who he was and didn't constantly have to question whether or not he could trust the people in his life. When it was just him and Tubbo against the world, making friends and allies that wanted to help them make the world a better place for other people like them.

Back to before Tubbo was Schlatt's son and before Ranboo was just another fucked up foster kid. Before Wilbur and Phil were heroes. Before he ever knew Techno.

Except that time had never existed, because all of those things had always been true and Tommy just didn't know it. He wished it could have been a reality. He just wanted to go back to a time when it seemed like the world made sense.

Tommy just wanted to be Theseus again. He wanted to feel like he was the one in control, not the rest of the universe.

"*Tommy!*" a shrill voice broke through his thoughts. His head jerked up in a panic because that sounded like—

Clementine was sprinting down the alley on the other side of the fence, running right towards him.

He gasped, scrambling to grab his airsoft mask again as he scrambled to his feet. “Clem—”

“*Run!*” she shrieked as she activated her powers, a pair of moth wings appeared flapping hard enough to get her off the ground and over the fence in record time.

“Clem, wait!” he cried as she bolted past him before he could reach out to steady her.

When she made no indication of slowing down or having even heard him, Tommy took off after her gasping through the remainder of his tears.

“Clementine, slow down!” he shouted after her, pulling the mask back over his face. “What are we running—”

“Run faster!” she interrupted, throwing a wild, panicked look back over her shoulder at him. “They’ll be here soon!”

Tommy grit his teeth, ignoring the way his knee and hip protested as he put on an extra boost of speed to make a grab for the distressed girl. Frustratingly she seemed to suddenly speed up, even more, the second his fingers came within distance of the back of her soaked t-shirt.

His mind was racing as he tried to organize his storm of thoughts. He tried his best to take the meltdown he was in the middle of having and shove it into a little box in the back of his mind so he could focus on the new problem at hand.

Obviously whatever she was running from had Clementine in a panic. Had the mercenary from the hospital taken back his promise to wait to target his family and friends? Or had some of the bounty hunters from the last week finally found his connections themselves? Or was this something else?

But wait— Clem’s mothers didn’t seem like the kind of people who would live anywhere near this part of the city. What was she doing here? Had she already escaped and was on the run from her captors or was this a coincidence?

Tommy tried speeding up to catch his sister again, knowing she was far too panicked to answer any of his questions while they were still running. Yet, annoyingly, she somehow managed to dance out of his reach every single attempt, his fingers never so much as brushing her trailing strands of wet hair.

When had Clem gotten so damn *fast*?

Eventually, he was forced to give up on catching her as he tripped on a curb with his bad leg, sending shocks of pain all the way up to the base of his spine.

He distantly realized whatever he did to his leg may have been worse than he initially thought but it seemed like the least of his concerns at the moment. Now he had to focus on not losing sight of Clem as she sprinted a good length ahead of him, occasionally throwing a look back and urging him faster with a cry of fear.

Whenever Tommy tried to look back to catch a glimpse of what she was seeing, he was met with empty, wet streets that glistened in the flickering street lights.

His stomach churned uncomfortably, though that could have been from any number of the messed up things that had happened in the last, what, *hour*?

Still. Something wasn't right.

They made it maybe another four blocks at a dead sprint before Clementine suddenly veered right into a wide alley that Tommy recognized. With a final burst of effort, Tommy turned the corner as fast as humanly possible and dove to tackle the girl to the ground, hoping to stop the chase and get some answers from her before his legs completely gave out.

But for some reason— even as his eyes processed it all, how Clem had been forced to slow on the turn, how she was looking back at him, much closer than before— when he jumped, arms outstretched to pull her in close so he could take the brunt of the fall, his hands closed around empty air.

Empty air, right where Clementine was standing.

Tommy jerked in shock but managed to save the dive by taking the force to his shoulder and rolling with the momentum right back onto his feet. He stumbled back a few steps staring at where Clementine had come to a dead stop in the middle of the dark alley, her blue and grey eyes fixed on the faded mural of Black-Wing on the brick wall to Tommy's right.

Tommy didn't need to look at the mural, not after spending so many years sitting right here and staring at it, praying to be more like him someday. His eyes were fixed on Clem as she stood motionless in the rain.

Horror sunk its claws into his heart as he stared at her longer, taking in every little detail that just screamed wrong, wrong, *wrong*.

Despite the strong winds around them, her hair didn't move with it. It swayed slightly as she shifted her weight from foot to foot, still transfixed on the mural, but the wind and rain seemed to have no effect on its movement or dampness. No water dripped from her, the drops seeming to pass straight through her despite how thoroughly soaked her clothes and hair were. Her feet cause no ripples in the puddle she stood in.

But worst of all, she wasn't breathing. Her chest was eerily still and her eyes unblinking while she shifted oddly, like she was overcompensating for the missing details of the illusion.

"You're not really her," he nearly whispered with a mixture of relief and fear.

If this wasn't the real Clementine, then how did the person making the illusion know how she sounded when she screamed? How did they know what her face looked like when she was fighting for her life like that?

Was the real Clementine okay?

Suddenly, not-Clementine turned to him with a shit-eating grin that was so painfully hers it almost made Tommy falter. "You're something else, Tommy," she said with a bright laugh.

All Tommy could do was stand there, frozen in confusion and exhaustion as he tried to puzzle through what was happening here.

“What?” he croaked out, sounding a lot more pathetic than he hoped it would.

What— what kind of fucked up trap was this?

“I said you’re something else,” she repeated, the smile slipping from her face. “I was hoping to lead you a little closer to them before you figured it out, but I guess this works too. I’ll just have to stall a little longer, which, credit where credit is due, probably won’t be easy.”

That was what made Tommy’s brain kick back into gear because *this was a huge trap*. And he just followed his would-be captor to a secondary location without telling anyone.

Whisper’s earpiece.

All he needed was a chance, but he needed more information before he could risk anything.

Obviously, Clementine was a full illusion, with how Tommy had passed straight through her and how her movements had no effect on her surroundings. But who was creating the illusion? It must have been someone’s power but was it all in Tommy’s head or was the fake physically visible? Would the person creating the illusion be hiding somewhere nearby or were they already masking their presence from Tommy’s mind?

“Won’t be easy, huh?” he said, shifting his weight onto the balls of his feet, ready to move at a second’s notice. “I mean obviously because I’m the biggest man ever, but how the hell do *you* know that?”

“Because I’ve been watching you, Tommy,” a new voice answered from behind him, making Tommy nearly flinch as he whipped around to face them. He was thankful for the mask over his face that hid his wide eyed expression as he came face to face with Puffy, his old boss from the diner he used to work at.

Not-Puffy smiled at him with her signature sad yet disturbingly knowing smile, like she knew everything about Tommy without him having to say it. The sight made his stomach twist because how did they know Puffy used to look at him like that? He hadn’t seen her since long before Schlatt was in the picture.

“I’ve watched you for months,” Not-Puffy said. “I watched when you went to the mall with Phil Watson. When you’d go to the bakery for the day to hang out with Niki and Ranboo when the others were busy. When you pestered Wilbur at the grocery store. When you came home from your first gymnastics practice. When you’d stare out your window late at night, watching me back. We already talked about this at the hospital, remember?”

The mercenary from the hospital. Of course.

“But that—”

“Doesn’t explain how I know what those two look like?” a third voice replied, making Tommy turn again.

Beau stared back at him, though not the hero student Beau he had met just a few days prior. It was Beau from the first night they met, still in her oversized pyjamas and covered in cuts and blood from being thrown into the china cabinet by Vincent's powers.

"You'd be right, of course. I've no idea how to copy someone's expressions like that, even if illusions *were* my power." She smirked in a decidedly *not* Beau-like expression, the look far too...cruel for her face. "But that's why he's here to help. My knowledge about your life just let me know that digging in on the whole friends and family thing would be your weak spot, it's *his* powers that make it possible like this."

As if to emphasize the point she raised her arms and spread her wings, showing off just how many cuts she had from the glass and how many ruffled and broken feathers the rope bindings had left behind.

It was so incredibly fucked up Tommy didn't even want to dwell on it. He just wanted to fucking *leave*.

He turned slowly, taking in the alley and its exits at either end. Not-Clementine was still standing eerily still in the exact place where Tommy tried to grab her. Not-Puffy stood closer to the end of the alley Tommy had entered through while Not-Beau's wings fully blocked his view of the opposite end.

No time like the present then, he supposed.

Tommy turned tail, breaking into a dead sprint at Not-Puffy, who fell into a defensive stance as though preparing to stop him. Not wanting to take the chance Tommy feinted right as though to go around her and she took the bait, diving to the side and allowing him a clear shot for the end of the alley.

Tommy made it all of four strides past her before he spotted movement from the corner of his eye to his left.

He tried his best to gauge what this new assailant was trying to do but found himself hesitating in confusion as he recognized the figure. A familiar flash of a black and green jacket paired with a mop of soaked brown hair.

In the end it wasn't the illusion of Haywire that took him down, he and Tubbo had sparred plenty of times so Tommy had no reservations about dodging his attacks or returning a hit, it was his injured leg.

He tried to skip away from the low leg sweep that Not-Tubbo aimed at his ankles but ended up putting far too much trust on his unstable and achy joints. The combination of moving at a high speed and trying to switch directions with all his weight on the one leg that had his knee giving out and his hip sparking with a new sharp pain. He went down hard enough to knock the wind from his lungs but managed to avoid any serious injuries.

Tommy rolled to his back, much faster than his joints seemed comfortable with. He immediately reached a hand up to the earpiece hoping to send out any kind of signal before he lost the advantage of surprise.

However, his hand was stopped just inches away from the device by a tight, gloved hand closing around his wrist.

Not-Tubbo's eyes crinkled at the corners as he knelt over Tommy, pinning him down with a knee against the centre of his ribcage. Tommy wheezed painfully as he tried to struggle out from under the other, but Not-Tubbo apparently a lot heavier than the real one.

"Now, now," Not-Tubbo chided as he pulled down the black disposable mask that hid his identity as Haywire, "we wouldn't want to ruin the surprise, would we?"

He grinned, the sensation of the larger gloved hand squeezing his wrist when he could clearly see Tubbo's small, bare hand was unnerving. Not-Tubbo's weight shifted as he leaned over to remove the communicator from Tommy's ear with his other hand. "They'll be here soon enough anyway."

Tommy grinned as he felt the man's centre of gravity shift above him. "Fuck you," he spat before kicking one of his legs up high enough to catch the front of the man's shoulder with the back of his heel and shove him more off balance.

Not-Tubbo grimaced and rolled with the hit, as Tommy squirmed out from under him. He caught the brief victorious look the impostor shot at him when he held up the communicator he had apparently managed to keep a hold on, but the look was quickly wiped away when instead of turning to run, Tommy punched him square in the face.

The second his fist connected he activated his powers, and the illusion flickered and vanished along with the three other figures in the alley with them. It was only once the illusion was gone that Tommy realized his opponent started coughing painfully because the punch, which had been aimed straight for Not-Tubbo's jaw, had hit the person behind the illusion in the throat.

The man stumbled a few steps away from Tommy, clutching at his neck as he blinked up at the teen, blue and red eyes clouded in confusion.

When their eyes met Tommy couldn't help but return the look of confusion, because the man in front of him was not the mercenary from the hospital.

The man in front of him was wearing bright blue, white and red hero gear, though he was missing the iconic white goggles that usually completed the look.

For a moment he almost wasn't sure it was the same hero, with the strange grey and white streaks through the front of his hair and the way his soaked brown hair was plastered to his head, making him look dishevelled in a way he never looked in public battles. But between the genuine netherite armour and the display of the powers Tommy had just fought against, there was no denying who this man was.

Spectre, the Nightmare hero, swallowed painfully and suddenly scowled at something over Tommy's shoulder, hands reaching for the batons strapped to his sides.

A sigh behind him made Tommy risk a glance back over his shoulder where he met the piercing gaze of the mercenary.

The man was dressed head to toe in black, a high neck shirt and leather gloves making sure to cover every inch of exposed skin aside from his face. Tommy's gaze shot between the mercenary and the hero before he shifted to put his back to the wall and keep both in his line of sight.

"Well boys, you know how that old saying goes," the mercenary said, lifting up a black ski mask that he pulled over his head. "If you want something done right, better do it yourself."

If Techno hadn't already killed Dream once and knew he didn't like the feeling of it, he might have just killed him to make him *shut up*.

It was hard enough to try and deal with the chats nonsensical yammering every second of every day, but something about Dream's single minded stupidity seemed to be setting chat off even more than usual, which was in turn making Techno regret everything ever.

"You know that's not how this whole favour etiquette thing works, right?" Techno drawled in an attempt to hide how actually aggravating the conversation was becoming.

Someone's pissy

He just misses his goggy woggy so much

DNF IS REAL

Kill dream hes annoying

BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD

Jesus dreams being so needy right now

Help find gogy!

Little piss baby misses his gogs KEWK

Kill him so he shuts up techno, you know you want to--

And oh boy did he. If chat said the words "gogy" or "dnf" one more time, Techno might just snap and do it.

"Okay, fine then. Techno, I need to ask you for a favour and in return, I'll help you find your brothers," Dream said like that was a rational train of thought.

Techno sighed for the third time in the last ten minutes, eyeing the nearest telephone pole as they drove and debating the merit of driving straight into it to avoid the rest of this conversation. If he wasn't so concerned about where the hell Wilbur had been for the last few days after their fight, it might have been more than a passing thought. A little car accident never hurt anybody *too* bad.

Rude!

Dude not cool

Ranboo literally told you his parents died in a car accident

Bruh

That kinda messed up man

F

Techno resisted the urge to sigh again. Fine. No car accidents.

"Also not how this works," Techno said instead of driving them off the road. "You already agreed to help me find my brothers. So once we do *that*, if you really still want my help, I'll help you find George as payment of *my* debt to *you*."

Dream sighed harshly, crossing his arms and sitting back in his seat like a petulant child who just got told they couldn't go for ice cream.

"George literally got kidnapped by the *Amigops*, I don't see how your delinquent brothers fucking off without their phones is more pressing than that on *any* level."

Techno ran his tongue over one of his new tusks as he considered his next words carefully, ignoring the new wave of stupid comments from chat. As much as he wanted to throw Dream out of his car and find them himself, he had already come this far and wasn't about to forgo the assistance the man was capable of providing when they were cooperating.

"First of all, shut up." Ah great start Techno, good job. "Second of all, if you're as good as you say you are, then it should be no problem at all to at least find Wilbur. He hasn't been gone that long and I doubt he's actually trying to go into hiding, so if we find him soon, maybe we'll get lucky and he has some leads on Tommy."

"Or maybe," Dream countered in a haughty tone that reminded him of Wilbur when he was being shitty, "we just find George before they kill him and I don't turn you in for the numerous infractions that I've witnessed you commit over the last few--"

He was abruptly cut off by a pained grunt as Techno slammed on the brakes and jerked the wheel to pull the car up to the curb.

"Get out of my car," he said plainly, no longer trying to hide his annoyance.

Dream blinked at him in confusion. "Excuse me?"

“Look man, I know better than most that using a totem messes you up for a few months, but you’re crossing a line right now. If you think *blackmail* is the way to get me to respect you while still trying to maintain your moral high ground over me, then you are sorely misunderstanding our professional relationship right now. So get out.”

For a moment the only sound in the car came from the rain pattering against the roof and the quick rhythm of the windshield wipers battling against the torrent of water.

Then Dream scoffed. “And who’s fault was it that I had to use that totem?”

“Yours,” Techno deadpanned. “Foolish could have brought you back just as fast without the drawbacks, you knew that and made your choice.”

“Fuck you,” Dream spat.

“Uh-huh. So are you gonna help me find Wilbur so we can go after George? Or are you gonna keep being a morally grey hypocrite and get out of my car so we can both just forget about this and go on our way?”

Dream rolled his eyes and turned to glare out the windshield at the rapidly darkening streets. His sullen expression slowly shifted into a pinched look of confusion as he squinted into the falling darkness.

“Is uh, that's not Wilbur’s place, is it?” he said, jerking his chin to point out the window.

Techno frowned and slowly turned to follow the others' gaze until he spotted the distant flashing lights of nearly a dozen emergency response vehicles flashing in the distance.

Uh ohhhhh

Oh boy what is it this time

F

Checks out

Man, cant leave him alone for a minute huh

**kronk voice* oh yeah, its all coming together*

BLOOD

o7s hes probably dead or something knowing him

At the string of voices reacting in his mind, Techno’s confusion shifted to genuine alarm. The second he recognized the emotion he shut it down.

Wilbur had to be fine, most of the time he could handle himself. If there were enough lights to be seen from this distance that at least meant there was an actual incident, so at least there

was probably an ambulance if things got out of hand. At least that many vehicles were more comforting than a single ambulance.

Techno wasn't sure what he would do if he pulled up and it was a single ambulance.

As it was, he let out a long sigh and glanced back at his blind spot before pulling back onto the half flooded roads.

"If he's not dead, I'm gonna kill him," he grumbled under his breath.

Dream huffed, but knew better than to comment. Even after all these years, it was a touchy subject when it came to Dream and Wilbur.

Techno was forced to pull up to the curb long before they reached the police line due to the growing crowd of evacuees from the apartment complex. Whatever happened had obviously been quite the ordeal, if the dozens of cop cars, fire trucks, ambulances and large secure transport trucks were anything to go by.

Despite the fact that that wasn't exactly a good sign, some part of Techno still relaxed. If the incident was that big, it at least meant Wilbur hadn't done something horrible to himself when left to his own devices.

Small mercies.

Beside him, Dream didn't hesitate to pull a cloth mask over the lower half of his face before throwing up his hood and ducking out into the rain. Techno took a moment to put on a disposable black mask before following suit.

They weaved their way through the crowd as quickly as possible, not needing to exchange words as they made their way towards the police line. Though he and Dream hardly ever got along, he could at least appreciate that the man knew when it was time to shut up and get to business. The quicker they found Wilbur, the sooner they could look for George, like Techno had been saying for hours.

"Sorry gentlemen, nobody goes beyond the line unless you require medical attention," said the hero Dream approached.

Techno blinked in surprise as he recognized the man as Starr-Strike, just in an updated costume. He couldn't help but frown at the realization that he was a pro-level hero, and if they had a pro guarding the police line then something *really* intense must have happened.

Dream didn't hesitate to flash his hero license and Techno calmly followed. If had been a little too distracted to consider they wouldn't get past the police line in civvies, nobody made a comment as he retrieved his own license.

"We're just looking for Whisper," Dream said as Starr-Strike blinked at their IDs, brows raised in surprise. "Any chance he was on this scene?"

Starr-Strike briefly glanced Techno's way before sighing. He nodded. "Whisper was the hero who reported it. Residents reported gunfire but he was the one that called in the calvary." He

turned, gesturing for them to follow. “Took out forty-three guys without any backup and managed to walk away with just some scrapes and bruises. Not bad for a guy who drove into the bay last week, I honestly can’t tell if he’s got great or awful luck.”

“Knowing him, I’d say it’s awful,” Dream huffed, something biting in his tone.

“Watch it,” Techno grunted. The last thing they needed was Dream riling up Wilbur the second they got within a foot of each other.

He turned his attention back to Starr-Strike as they wove through the bustling crowds of cops and firemen. “You sure he’s okay?”

Starr-Strike shrugged. “Looked fine to me,” he replied. “I’d bet he’s pretty tired though, I had no idea his powers were that strong but I guess it’s not that surprising. He’s your brother and Tempest’s son, after all.”

Dream snorted under his breath and Techno resisted the voices urging him to punch him.

Starr-Strike was from the generation of heroes between them and the OGs like Tempest or Captain Sparklez, so while many heroes knew they were family only their classmates or Phil’s friends knew about the circumstances. Luckily Dream didn’t actually say enough to set off Techno’s temper before they reached the ambulances.

Techno had seen Wilbur in a lot of sorry states throughout their lives, so he could confidently say this wasn’t exactly one of them.

Sure, he objectively looked like shit. Between the pallor of his skin, the painfully dark circles under his eyes and the oxygen mask he was currently holding to his face to take slow, deep breaths, he didn’t look great. But this was not a Wilbur who was tasting defeat or too exhausted to go on.

This Wilbur looked very, very *pissed*.

“Great, we found him,” Dream huffed, turning to Techno with a poorly concealed look of annoyance. “Will you help me find Spectre now?”

Techno ignored him in favour of narrowing his eyes at Wilbur. “Any luck?”

Wilbur met his eye briefly before quickly looking away.

Good

Yeah feel guilty bitch!

Blood?

Come on guys he was just worried

Stinky little evil man

Cut him some slack

Only if he actually found something, otherwise toast him

“A little,” Wilbur said, lowering the oxygen mask slightly. He turned his gaze to Dream with a venomous glare. “I’ll only share if *he* pisses off though.”

Dream scoffed, stepping forward to most likely start a fight only to be stopped by Techno’s hand on his shoulder. “Give us a minute,” he said. “Then our favours square and we can start lookin’ for him.”

Dream hesitated for a moment, caught in a staring contest with a poisonous look of his own.

“Fine,” he spat, breaking eye contact first and stopping off in the direction they had come from.

From the back of the ambulance, Wilbur only let the smallest look of satisfaction settle on his face before he hid it behind the oxygen mask again.

That had been easier than Techno had thought, honestly.

Beside him, Starr-Strike glanced between the two with a pained look before turning back to Whisper.

“Just remember, you can’t leave until you give the detectives a report,” he said. “Technically your license is on suspension right now so you’ll just need to get an all clear for a self defence exemption.”

Whisper nodded as he lowered the mask again. “Of course, thanks for all the help Starr.”

Starr-Strike grinned, offering a casual salute as he backed up towards the police line again. “Take care of yourself man, you really killed it out there tonight.”

Whisper shot back a casual salute of his own as Techno hauled himself into the back of the ambulance, shutting the doors behind him.

The silence that followed was painfully awkward.

He better apologize

Fight fight fight

No say you're sorry

For what?

Being a jerk about tommy

He's the jerk!

Fight

Fight

“Schlatt put a ten million dollar bounty on Tommy’s head,” Wilbur said to break the silence.

Techno’s head shot up to stare at Wilbur, looking for any signs of a lie or exaggeration. All he saw was how hard Wilbur’s free hand clutched at his knee and just how rigid he sat on the small bench across from Techno, betraying his quiet anger.

“That’s a conversation starter if I’ve ever heard one,” Techno said deadpan, hoping to ease some of the tension between them. For once the quiet joke fell flat and Wilbur glared at the floor between their boots.

Eventually, Wilbur let out a harsh sigh. “He’s headed for Phil’s safehouse, the one in the lower district,” he said, still not looking up. “I promised him I’d come, but I think I’m gonna be stuck here for a while and I don’t want to leave him that long.”

Chat erupted into a cacophony of questions and shouting but Techno found his own flood of questions drowning them out.

Where had Tommy been all this time? How had Wilbur found him? What did Schlatt want with Tommy? How on earth was it worth ten million dollars? Had Wilbur seen Tommy? Was he here? Was the attack on the apartment building about them or something else?

What could Techno even do about any of it?

Despite the number of questions in his mind doubling every second, he asked none of them out loud. Even if Wilbur knew all the answers and was willing to tell him, this was neither the time nor place.

“He’s headed there on his own?” Techno asked instead. There were more pressing matters than the *why*’s of it all, he needed to know what was happening *now*.

Wilbur nodded slowly. “He’s— We didn’t really have a choice. I stayed back to distract the mercs that were storming the building and trusted he could get away on his own,” he explained, like there was somehow a world where leaving Tommy to fend for himself was actually a logical decision.

“Why?” Techno asked as evenly as he could, ignoring the voices’ enraged reactions in his mind.

“Why what?”

“Why,” he started slowly, “would you trust *Tommy*, the kid who got drunk, shot and stabbed and nearly *died* the first time that either of us met him, to take care of himself? *Why* would you think that’s a good idea, Wilbur?”

Something Techno couldn’t decipher crossed Wilbur’s expression and vanished nearly as quickly as it came. Techno frowned.

Wilbur sighed. “It’s— it’s because I don’t think that’s what happened before I found him in that alley,” he said quietly, gaze trained on the floor. “I think he’s—” he cut himself off, brows furrowing as he pursed his lips.

He knows

Liarbur

Holy shit did he figure it out

Of course he did nobody's that blind

Ten bucks says he won't tell

“You think he’s what,” Techno pressed. Did chat know something he didn’t? They seemed to do that sometimes but it never made sense until later, but what did Wilbur know?

Wilbur shook his head. “I think you were right, about him hiding something,” he admitted after a moment. “But he has gear and training of— of some kind. He flipped a full-grown man in riot gear down the stairs and made the two-story jump between buildings without a grapple line. He can take care of himself for now. But I— I promised I’d come back for him, and I can’t do that if something *does* happen between now and whenever they let me off.”

He finally looked up at Techno with an intense light shining in his eyes. “Please.”

Oh he definitely knows

Wait am i missing something?

10mill is a loooottt of money

Hope he can stay away from any cliffs KEWK

Techno wasn’t *that* much of an idiot. He knew Tommy wasn’t just some kid just from the level that they sparred at. But that didn’t make it any less jarring to see Wilbur tiptoeing just around the heart of the matter.

Wilbur knew what Tommy was, but he wasn’t going to tell Techno.

If it was that easy to figure out, then how didn’t Techno know already? What was he missing?

Unless it was something he *should* already know.

They only held eye contact for a short moment before Techno grunted, looking away.

“I won’t be able to check on him until I can lose Dream for the night,” Techno said, bouncing his leg lightly to burn off his sudden nerves. He crossed his arms and leaned back against the wall of the ambulance behind him. “You’ll probably be free sooner than me in that department.”

Wilbur's gaze narrowed and his hand tightened around the oxygen mask. "What kind of favours were you two trading anyway? When I said you two must be really buddy-buddy these days, I didn't think you were *that* close."

"We're not," Techno nearly snapped. "I asked him for help finding you and Tommy and in return, he asked me to help him find Spectre."

That finally seemed to get Wilbur's attention, startling him enough that his head jerked up in surprise.

"Spectre? He's missing?"

Techno grimaced slightly under his facemask, suddenly realizing that Wilbur may have missed a lot of very important, very disturbing news in the days he had been rogue.

"You been keeping up with the news lately?"

Wilbur slowly lowered the oxygen mask with a frown. "Not much aside from the weather," he said slowly. "He wasn't caught up in the flooding after dad's fight, was he?"

Techno hummed for a moment. "Kinda," he replied. "He and two interns got trapped in the underground river tunnels. According to the intern that *wasn't* turned into a wither-hybrid, they were ambushed by the Amigops. Tycoon got the kids out but Spectre and CPK never came back. No bodies or ransoms have turned up, so Dream's dead set on finding Spectre himself."

Finally, Wilbur seemed over his aversion to looking Techno in the eye as he studied his face intently with a faint look of horror. "An intern got hit with Trigger?"

"And two of Tempest's interns got shot with netherite bullets, Captain Sparklez is in a coma and his intern is dead. Oh, and Schlatt kidnapped Haywire again," Techno summed up bluntly. "Far as I can tell, the universe seems to have it out for nosey teenagers this week, so you might want to call Phil to check on the kid."

Ooo somebodies worried

TechnoBro

Aw you really do care

Bets on the kid dying?

TechnoSoft

Oh shit wait when did Tubbo get kidnapped? I think I missed something

"Schlatt got Tu-- I mean, Haywire?" Wilbur nearly whispered, his face looking even paler.

Techno pursed his lips and nodded, ignoring chats' continued efforts at teasing. "That's what happened to Sparklez and his intern, they were trying to help Endwalker save him. But that's

not exactly public info, just so you know.”

His brother's expression immediately screwed up into a look of confusion. “Not public-- Tech what--”

A loud banging on the side of the rig interrupted him. “Blade! You done in there?” Dream called out. “We should get moving, Ace texted me saying he found a lead!”

“Yeah just a sec!” Techno called back as Wilbur raised the oxygen mask back up to his face, expression still laced with concern. He turned back to his brother. “Call Phil, get this shit dealt with and we’ll talk more later. I have the feeling there’s a lot more going on than we thought and comparing notes might not be a bad place to start.”

He stood, crouching slightly as he reached for the handles to open the back doors of the rig.

“Wait,” Wilbur said, almost too quiet to hear as Techno’s boots hit the wet asphalt outside the ambulance.

Techno looked back over his shoulder, frown hidden beneath his damp mask.

“I’m sorry,” Wilbur said, still not looking directly at him.

Techno resisted the urge to sigh as the voices cheered, some calling for blood while others teased him for having a family moment.

“Whatever,” he said shortly, disappointing most of the voices. “We’ll talk about it once everything calms down, just make sure Tommy gets out in one piece.”

Wilbur gave a jerky nod. “Good luck I guess,” he said, lending back against the wall of the rig with a dull thunk of his head.

“Blade! Let’s go! This lead isn’t gonna be good for long, they’re on the move!” Dream called out from where he was already waiting near the police line, his body tense with impatience.

“Yeah, you too,” Techno said to Wilbur before turning to follow Dream back into the rain.

They’d have time to figure everything out later. For now, Techno just had to do his part and pray they could find the important answers before it was too late.

Chapter End Notes

Chaos sweet chaos.

Okay, I'm gonna be real I have not been getting along with the writing goblin recently and therefore barely even have a few pages of a draft for chapter 30. Hopefully, I'll get through it sooner than later but between working 30-40 hours a week and school starting back up soon... we'll just have to wait and see I guess. I'm sure you guys will be fine, if

the wilbur falling for two months meme is anything to go by yall are used to the cliff hangers by now.

Love you all and the beautiful comments and kudos you leave because you're cool <3

Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

As Tommy tries to escape The Handler, paths cross and significant revelations are made.

Chapter Notes

MORE ART!!

[Crumb's Death Sketch](#) by @Monotonous_Grey on Twitter

As always thank you all for the lovely comments and kudos, they make my day! And of course, thank you to my wonderful beta for helping me clean up this 7.5k monstrosity of a prolonged fight scene, I couldn't do it without them <3

Also OH BOY this chapter's a doozy stay safe out there

CW/TW: Mind Control, Graphic Injuries, Suicide Attempt and Murder

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy suppressed a shiver as a heavy silence settled over the alley, leaving only the slow patter of rain.

He was caught in the middle of the alley, Spectre to his right and the mercenary from the hospital to his left. Despite having already erased Spectre's powers he wasn't entirely sure what was happening here or what he should be doing about it.

Was Spectre working with the villain? If he wasn't then what reason did he have to attack Tommy? If he was then *why*?

The mercenary was working for Schlatt but had obviously gone back on his promise of giving Tommy time to come willingly. What changed? Why was the timetable moved up fast enough to push such a large bounty on Tommy's head? That couldn't be why Spectre was here, was it? Heroes made good money.

It wasn't— there was no way Spectre knew he was Theseus.

Right?

He was still pretty sure even the mercenary didn't know that. Nobody should aside from his allies, just as he left it before Theseus's "death".

The mercenary moved first, his hand jerking at his side as though reaching for a gun and making both the hero and Tommy spring into action.

Tommy jerked back as Spectre dove for him, nearly stumbling as the pain in his joints flared. Yet when Spectre missed Tommy, he kept moving forward toward the mercenary.

Tommy only let himself blink in confusion for a moment, watching Spectre kick the gun from the mercenary's hand in shock.

What was that saying? Don't look like a gift horse to water?

Fucking whatever, it didn't matter. What did matter was that now neither of them were trying to hit Tommy and that was his cue to run.

He whipped around, aiming for the now open end of the alley that Spectre had vacated and made a break for it as fast as his aching legs could carry him. He could hear the mercenary swearing and the wet smack of someone hitting concrete behind him but kept running until he was across the other side of the street.

He went to turn left, hoping to make it closer to the safehouse address Wilbur had given him, only to find his feet suddenly glued to the ground at the sight that met him.

Dream and The Blade stood at the mouth of an alley not even twenty feet ahead of Tommy, and they were staring right at him.

Though neither of them were wearing their full hero gear, they still donned their iconic masks over rain jackets and heavy boots. It took what little threads of self control Tommy had left not to burst out laughing at the absurdity of the situation. He himself was still wearing the airsoft mask and had the hood of the Endwalker jacket pulled up over his hair, hiding all his features.

But of course, because the universe fucking hated him, they caught on right away.

"That's Endwalker's jacket," Dream said immediately, the air around his hand flashing green as his powers activated, and a gun appeared in his hand.

"Theseus," The Blade said, his voice suddenly so familiar that it made Tommy's stomach flip dangerously. The hero tilted his head, the shadows shifting across his boar skull mask to shine enough light inside for Tommy to see his eyes.

Once hard brown eyes had been replaced by black sclera and white pupils that glinted oddly in the dim streetlight. Just like they had in the light of his phone at the hospital.

"So she wasn't lying," he said after a moment. "You are alive."

Two things occurred to Tommy then.

Techno was an idiot, and Tommy really couldn't do this right now.

But by some grim irony, the universe chose to save him the trouble as a gunshot echoed from the alley he'd just run from, quickly followed by a cry of pain that made the hero's attention shift away from him.

Dream was already sprinting across the street toward the sound. "Spectre!" he called out, disappearing around the corner on the alleyway. Not a second later followed the sounds of more shots firing, now from two weapons instead of one.

Tommy and The Blade stared at each other, frozen for a long moment. He didn't even realize he was starting to shake until the hero sighed, stepping aside and gesturing toward the alley behind him.

"Get outta here kid," he rumbled, not unkindly. "I'll try to stop Dream from tellin' everyone about you."

Tommy swallowed hard, taking a shaking breath that he prayed was covered by the sound of the rain and fighting. He managed a small nod and The Blade returned the gesture before taking off after Dream down the street.

He tried his best to run, but between his quickly approaching adrenaline crash and the steadily worsening pain in his injured legs joints, it was slow going.

Still, he did what he could, maintaining his hold over Spectre's powers until the sounds of fighting faded into the distance and the headache from using his powers became too much to bear. Tears threatened to burn his eyes again but he blinked them away.

Techno didn't— he *didn't* need to know. All Tommy had to do was make it to the safehouse, hide the recognizable gear and fucking pray. It could work, in theory. It didn't matter that somehow after all the years they had fought, neither of them realized. It didn't matter that, looking back, he could see all the signs, that he had written it all off and not even considered the possibility. It didn't matter because he— he could keep up the charade. Maybe.

He had to make it work somehow because as much as he hated ~~feared~~ The Blade, Tommy... Tommy really fucking liked Techno. He stubbornly wanted something that was impossible but gods be damned if he wasn't going to try and make it work somehow.

Tommy would make it to the safehouse and Wilbur would follow soon after. They'd tell Techno and Phil the edited version of events and figure out how to get to the happy ending where Tommy wasn't a human experiment and got to actually keep his bedroom instead of moving to a protective facility or a jail cell. That's exactly what was going to happen next and Tommy wasn't taking no for an answer.

Not that the universe ever cared what Tommy wanted.

It was almost uncanny how familiar the scene was. It was a rainy night in an alley just outside the lower business district and while there was no sound of a wet cape snapping in

the wind this time, the crinkle of a rain jacket's sleeves gave away The Blade's presence above Theseus.

Tommy was springing into a dive to escape his attacker before even seeing who it was. The harsh sound of metal colliding with the concrete where he had just been standing sent a chilling wave of déjà vu through his mind as he whirled to face his enemy.

The Blade rose slowly, almost puppet-like as he fell into a waiting stance, sword arm limp at his side.

Theseus knew The Blade just as Tommy knew Techno, and he could safely say at even just a glance that something was off.

His first thought was that maybe it was one of Spectre's illusions again, but it was easy enough to see how the rain gathered on the hero's dark jacket, rolling down in rivulets and dripping into the puddle at his boots. But what was even easier to spot was the faintly glowing strings of pink light wrapped around his wrists, ankles and throat.

Tommy eyed the strings warily, noticing how they laid slack, trailing off into the darkness behind the hero.

He never did catch what the mercenary's powers were.

The sound of water splashing had him quickly moving into a defensive position. He whipped around so his back was guarded by a wall and he had both heroes in his line of sight.

It wasn't ScarletThorn that stood to his left this time, but Spectre once again. Just like The Blade, it wasn't hard to spot the pink strings of light trailing off into the same direction as those wrapped around The Blade's limbs. The sound of a boot scuffing brought his gaze up to the low roof of the building on the other side of the alley where Dream's stark white mask stared back. Just like the other two, pink threads around his limbs and throat trailed off into the night.

"It's funny," Spectre said, breaking the silence and drawing Tommy's attention back. "I don't think I ever properly introduced myself."

A snarky remark died on Tommy's lips as The Blade shifted in the corner of his vision. Spectre and the mercenary controlling them knew he was Tommy, but Dream and The Blade knew he was Theseus. Years of habit had him falling back into muteness in a vain attempt at hiding what was left of his secret identity.

To his other side, The Blade scoffed. "What happened to all the banter from before?" he teased in Techno's voice. "Not feeling up for a little chat with the city's top heroes?"

Tommy took a shuddering breath and looked up at the hero still on the roof. He raised a hand and flipped Dream off, half because he hated the hero and half to see what would happen.

Dream laughed, shaking his head. "Yeah, there he is," the hero said, seemingly picking up where The Blade left off. "Well in that case allow me to officially introduce myself—"

“—you can call me—” Spectre continued.

“—The Handler,” he finished in The Blade’s voice.

A fourth set of footsteps echoed behind The Blade as the masked man strolled into the alley with all the confidence of a cat that knew its prey was as good as caught.

His hands twisted strangely as he wrapped the same glowing strings of pink around his fingers, weaving them into a strange cat's cradle between his palms. Every inch of his skin was covered by the ski mask, aside from his eyes that glowed so bright that the whites of them were swallowed by the pinpoints of sickening fuschia light.

The Handler laughed like he didn’t have a care in the world, a stark contrast to the intense atmosphere slowly consuming the rest of the alley. “You know I think I’m starting to understand where Schlatt’s coming from with this whole Trigger business,” he said, lifting his hands and pulling them apart to reveal the intricate web the strings of light created. As the distance widened between his hands, the weave grew and the strings tied to the heroes drew tighter. All three of them slowly slid into ready stances, like puppets readying for a show. “If this is what I can do to the strongest heroes in the city with just a single dose, I can’t imagine how your powers will change the game once they’re in play.”

Tommy was tense and ready for the fight, but even he knew he couldn’t stand up to three pro level heroes for long.

The Blade moved first, because of course he did. Despite his fear and stewing confliction over the man, years of experience fighting him guided Tommy’s hands as he sidestepped the sword thrust at his chest. Instead, he grabbed the hero's wrist, pulling his momentum forward while Tommy used it to roll out of striking range.

Spectre and Dream were too far to intercept him but, almost to Tommy’s surprise, The Handler cut him off with a wide swing of his arm that forced the vigilante to duck. Tommy hardly brushed the ground before he was back on his feet and trying to run as fast as possible when a boot collided with the back of his bad knee forcing the joint to fold and dumping him on the ground.

He caught himself with his hands and scrambled forward, desperate to create distance between him and his assailants. Though no more attacks came from behind before he could gather his bearings again, by the time he stumbled to his feet Dream had already come down from the roof, blocking his path.

Fucking fantastic.

This time Tommy didn’t give the hero the chance to move first. Though he had no idea how exactly The Handler’s power over the heroes was working, it was obvious that none of his puppets were fighting at their full speed or strength, so Tommy wasn’t going to waste time being careful. He rushed forward, drawing the baton from his side at the same time that Dream’s hands flashed with the green light of his powers, producing a gleaming trident.

Dream jabbed the trident towards Tommy, forcing him back out of striking distance of the weapon's longer reach. He stumbled back only to realize that The Blade had already made his way over, the glint of dim magic off his sword's blade had Tommy twisting his way straight into the wall of the alley, narrowly avoiding losing limbs.

The Blade moved precise as ever and eerily silent as he adjusted his position so that instead of fully following through with his strike he brought the pommel of his weapon back into Tommy's stomach. The teeg gagged on a sound of pain as the force of it threw him against the wall again. He wheezed as he managed to push off the wall once more, taking in the scene again as everyone readied their next attacks.

In front of him, The Blade lowered his weapon, the tip of it ghosting over the ground as he turned to face Tommy, the pink glow in his eyes lighting up more of his face than Tommy really wanted to see at the moment.

Dream, Spectre and The Handler were all moving to surround the two, Dream's hands flashing green as he summoned two more handguns and passed them to his teammate and their puppet master.

He *really* had some choice words for all of them, but his fear of discovery kept him silent. This couldn't be how Techno found out. It'd be preferable if Techno *never* found out, obviously, but he wasn't going to let it happen here.

Which was why he lunged for the man, grabbing Techno by the shoulders and driving his knee into the hero's stomach, earning a pained grunt for his efforts.

Tommy never thought the day would come when he found The Blade not wearing body armour concerning but here he was. He kinda fucking hated it honestly. He didn't want to hurt Techno but he also knew that even before he put two and two together Wilbur's brother was more than capable of kicking Tommy's ass.

So Tommy was just going to have to kick his faster.

The Blade's weapon swung towards him but their fights were a well-oiled machine after so much time spent pitted against one another. Tommy felt the movement coming with his shoulder still under the vigilante's hand and moved to intercept it, driving the hard bone of his elbow into the soft tendons of the junction of The Blade's own.

The Blade grunted, his whole arm jerking at the blow, making him drop his sword. Tommy didn't waste the second, taking the opportunity to go for yet another dirty blow that would usually be stopped by the hero's armour. He tried not to feel bad as he kicked him in the side of the knee as forcefully as he dared without breaking tendons or bone.

Of course, because of his newfound aversion to hurting Techno, it didn't do much more than make the man stumble as Tommy attempted to run past him.

Now, the weird part about tridents that you can only ever learn the hard way was the fact that, when thrown, they often made very little sound. This was also the part that Tommy always happened to forget about them.

One moment he was running and the next there was a trident embedded in the wall in front of him. It was at shoulder level and it was there so suddenly he couldn't have stopped himself from hitting it if he tried. He ran straight into the weapon's shaft, his momentum carrying his legs forward and out from under him, the trident stopping his torso from following. He landed on his back hard enough to rattle his head and knock the wind from his lungs.

He rolled onto his side, gasping in near panic to get air back into his lungs as the back of his head throbbed in time with his racing heart.

A boot collided with his stomach, and even though the armoured vest took most of the blow, he nearly retched, as breathing became almost impossible. Then a kick to his ribs followed by two more. Another to his face cracked his plastic mask.

Tommy bit the side of his tongue as he forced himself to breathe deep through his nose. When the next kick came for his aching chest he caught the foot and locked his arms around it. In one swift move, he kept his hold on the leg, put his weight back on his shoulders against the ground and swung his feet up into his attacker's stomach.

It was only as the man grunted and tipped over, unable to catch himself with Tommy holding his legs, that he realized it was Spectre. His legs followed through with the momentum of the strange kick and Tommy rolled to follow them until he was crouched over the hero, pinning him to the ground.

It was honestly a stroke of luck that it was Spectre that Tommy got the hit on, because he was the only one not wearing a mask.

Spectre tried in vain to twist out of Tommy's hold, but it wasn't enough to escape before the teen's fist collided with the hero's face, his powers activating and immediately erasing the others' powers. Tommy only got half a second to feel satisfied by the turn of the tides before something heavy collided with the back of his pounding head.

He snarled as the aching in his skull throbbed painfully. He tried to dive forward and away from whoever was behind him only for a thick pair of arms to wrap around his chest and yank him off of Spectre. The arms snaked under his shoulders and locked hands behind his head, immobilizing his own arms and leaving the rest of his body completely undefended.

His vision was suddenly filled with a forest green rain jacket and white mask that glistened menacingly in the rain and low lights of the seedy alley. Tommy could suddenly understand why running from that unseeing, cold, smiling mask was enough to make Ranboo quit his vigilante antics.

One thing Tommy had learned early on in his career as a vigilante was that the bulletproof vests they wore were not *really* as helpful as one might think. Of course, if you got shot it would do its job of stopping the bullet from piercing your skin, as long as it wasn't made of netherite, so that was nice. But a bulletproof vest couldn't stop a well placed knife, or a hard swing from a sword or axe. A bulletproof vest couldn't stop something from breaking your ribs if it hit you with enough force. Hell, half the time if something was trying to break your ribs the added weight of the vest only made it hurt *more*.

Tommy had also taken his fair share of one sided beatings in his life. A lot of them in alleys just like this, from kids just a few years his senior, just big enough to hold him steady as everyone used him as a punching bag.

But in all his infinite wisdom of how to take a beating before turning around and fucking up the other guys, Tommy had never been more afraid that one of his cracked ribs might actually have a chance at puncturing a lung. He gasped for air like a fish out of water. He struggled against The Blade's hold with all the desperation of an animal caught in a trap, snarling and thrashing and pulling so hard at his own shoulders that he felt something crack.

None of it helped. Nothing he did could make The Blade loosen his grip and no amount of thrashing and kicking could stop every devastating kick Dream landed on his torso or the cruel slice of a trident across the side of his leg.

Tommy screamed as the weapon's prongs cut through his cargo pants and dug into his skin, but the sound that came out of his mouth was more akin to a gasping, gurgling breath of something on the verge of a slow death.

He resisted the urge to sob, somehow still aware enough to feel humiliation as his legs gave out from under him. He once again had been so set on running and surviving that he hadn't even got any good hits in. Hadn't so much as bruised the heroes or the villain controlling them in retaliation to the beatdown he was going to receive either way.

Dream drew back the trident in one a sharp motion that tore through skin instead of slicing, but this time a renewed wave of hysteria just made Tommy *laugh* instead of screaming.

Nothing had changed. Three months later and Tommy hadn't changed one bit. He was still the exact same weak and cowardly *child* that stuttered at the sight of a gun and was so desperate to escape a fight that he'd run instead of standing his ground to fight and fucking lose anyway. Vince, Styx, the Blackwell's, Wilbur— it was all the *same*.

It didn't matter how many times Theseus could beat up a mugger or help a lost kid get home at night because when it came down to it, when it came down to *Tommy*, he was useless. He ran and people died, he ran and people still got hurt, he ran and was too weak to defend himself when he couldn't run fast enough.

Dream's head tilted to the side slightly, his mask cold and expressionless despite its wide, childlike smile.

“Something funny kid?” came the muffled question from behind Dream, still standing motionless in front of Tommy.

Tommy blinked back tears and laughed again at the sight his eyes landed on.

The Handler was standing in the middle of the alley where Tommy had managed to pin Spectre and erase his powers. The mercenary's foot was planted on Spectre's chest, though the thing pinning the man in place was more likely the gun aimed down at his head. Spectre seemed frozen as he stared down the barrel like looking away would guarantee the firearm

going off. His eyes were noticeably no longer glowing pink and the strings that had attached him to The Handler were nowhere to be found.

As useless as it was at the moment, at least Tommy knew that using his powers on one of the mercenaries' victims would break the man's control over them along with erasing their own powers. And much as it pissed off Tommy to see that the hero was freezing up over a gun, he knew he wasn't exactly in a place to judge.

Tommy laughed again, the sound as stuttering and broken as he now felt inside.

Maybe just as broken as he had felt this entire time. Since he gave up fighting on a bloodstained bathroom floor.

"S-shoot me," he laughed at the mercenary. "It'll be a lot easier for all of us that way, just put me out of my fucking misery and you won't have to worry about a live captive anymore."

The solid arms locking him in place loosened suddenly and Tommy slumped forward as his support vanished, leaving him to collapse, his knees digging into the wet cement below.

The world is silent for a long moment and for the first time since he started running after not-Clementine his adrenaline began to fade enough for his injuries to make themselves known. And everything was in fucking *agony*.

Every muscle burned like his body was a forest fire, some places smouldering aches from the previous week of non-stop running and fighting while others were blazing infernos of newly torn muscles and cracked bones. His head pounded in time with his racing heart in a way that felt like an entire swarm of bees beating against the back of his skull. Not to mention the heavy, hot, tingling sensation spreading across the side of his left leg where Dream's trident had left its mark. Or how his heart was beating so fast he could barely even hear the rain over the sound of blood rushing in his ears.

By the time The Handler broke the silence Tommy almost didn't register the sound of his voice, much less the words he said.

Though he missed whatever the man said, when Tommy looked back up it was clear that he was sure the fight was over. The mercenary was hauling Spectre up by the collar of his hero suit, pistol still trained on his head. Spectre said something in a harsh tone and his captor's shoulders shook with laughter.

Tommy's gaze slid away from them and found Dream's cold mask still fixed on him, lit up orange from the nearby streetlight with the faintest highlights of pink from the strings of light still wrapped tight around his throat and limbs. Something in Tommy's stomach twisted.

Obviously, The Handler wasn't going to kill him, not when he had so much leverage to keep him in line and *definitely* not when he had two extra sets of hands at his disposal. But he had three pairs before Tommy changed that. He'd have to deal with being unable to control Spectre so long as Tommy held fast to the hero's powers.

His eyes slid down to the pistol in Dream's hand, his finger resting casually on the trigger.

The Handler wouldn't kill him, but Dream might.

And if Tommy couldn't get the impossible happy ending he wanted, he sure as fuck wasn't going to go quietly on somebody else's terms. He was going to go out in a blaze of glory. Something bright enough to burn him to ashes leaving nothing else to feel.

The second the decision was locked into his mind, it was like his body shut off the part of his brain that cared about avoiding pain. Tommy was on his feet again in a flash, leg already swinging into a high crescent kick that collided right with Dream's head.

He could hear Spectre and The Handler shouting and the earsplitting gunshots that followed, but that didn't matter. All that Tommy cared about was getting that stupid damn mask off Dream's face so he could erase the mercenary's hold over him.

Dream stumbled and his body was forced to follow as his head knocked right into the brick wall of the alley. There was a satisfying crack of porcelain against red clay. Tommy followed through with the movement of the high kick and quickly spun to face The Blade just in time to grab the man's arm as he reached for Tommy.

Tommy wrapped the hero's bicep in a death grip, tugging him forward as Tommy turned his own body so the arm went over his shoulder. His hip dug into The Blade's stomach as he pulled The Blade forward and off the ground. He followed their forward moment into a judo throw and sent the hero sprawling across the ground at his feet.

Dream was back on him not a moment later with a kick of his own aimed for the center of Tommy's chest. He twisted to turn the attack into a glancing blow and if it rattled his broken ribs, Tommy couldn't feel it anymore. Despite missing his target, Dream used the opportunity to step into Tommy's space with an elbow strike straight to the middle of Tommy's own mask.

The blow landed heavy enough to make Tommy stumble back a few steps, but he was completely oblivious to the sound of cracking plastic or the feeling of sharp edges cutting into his skin until cold water splashed against the now exposed lower right half of his face.

There was no panic mixed in with the realization, only pure desperation.

The vigilante retaliated recklessly by stepping right into Dream's space and smashing his head against where Dream's nose would be under the mask. Dream's head whipped back at the force and, for all it was worth, Tommy took the momentary stun. He grabbed a hold of the front of Dream's jacket, planted his other hand on the hero's shoulder and hooked his ankle behind one of Dream's before shoving his upper body forward and yanking his foot out from under him.

As Dream landed flat on his back a heavy roundhouse kick sent Tommy careening into the wall, his head hitting against it with the sound of even more crunching plastic. He kept moving, completely uncaring of the pain flaring all over his body as his brain almost felt like it was filled with TV static.

He turned to face The Blade and deftly avoided a jab aimed at his face but missed the following uppercut that caught him under the chin with the sound of more cracking plastic. Stinging cuts opened across his face as the shards dug into the soft flesh. Still, he only stumbled back a few steps, completely undeterred by the pain or the taste of iron on his tongue.

He rushed forward, ducking and weaving under the gloved strikes aimed for his face until he was wrapping his arms around the hero's torso and throwing their collective weight just the right way to send The Blade careening toward the ground as Tommy stood up straight. The Blade rolled onto his back and attempted to push back up by planting only to be met with a red and black combat boot right to his mask.

Techno was going to try and stop Tommy either way, so he may as well have the free will to hesitate.

The faux bone mask didn't give so easily but the pain of it rattling against the man's face must have been enough that he stopped trying to push up in favour of protecting his face. Tommy drew back for a second kick, but he stopped short, not willing to give the hero a chance to grab his leg while Dream was still on the ground right there.

He whipped around, roughly forcing Dream back to the ground as the man tried sitting up. Tommy pinned him with his knees on the hero's shoulders as he clawed at the edges of his mask for a release or a hint of bare skin. Dream writhed under him but Tommy just leaned his body weight further onto his knees until he heard the click of a gun's safety that made his lips twitch.

"I'll make him shoot you to stop you from breaking my control," Dream said like the puppet he was. "But you're going to wish it was enough to kill you when I make you watch as I kill all three of these *heroes*."

Tommy ignored the threat as his fingers caught familiar latches on either side of the mask's straps and dug underneath them with practiced ease. It was exactly the same as the specialized masks Haywire made for Theseus, Endwalker and Amnesia.

The smooth white mask came free not even half a second later, exposing a young face with glowing pink eyes and an almost identical scar to The Blade's, a crooked mark across the bridge of his nose. Tommy's hand darted to touch the visible skin even before the rain had the chance to. The pink glow faded, leaving behind unnaturally green eyes and a piercing glare so familiar Tommy couldn't help but laugh.

He looked so much like his sister it was a miracle Tommy hadn't put two and two together the first time he saw this man. He was one of Wilbur and Techno's classmates that Tommy and Phil ran into at the mall. Because of course he was, how else did all those heroes get to the mall so fast?

The barrel of the gun dug into his hip as Tommy leaned back with a delirious grin on his face.

"Get off of me," Dream snarled, his eyes not quite meeting Tommy's through the remains of Theseus's mask. The barrel dug in harder.

“Do it,” Tommy goaded, his voice raspy and cracking. “You hate vigilantes, don’t you? Every—”

Familiar hands circled his torso and Tommy cried out as he was slammed face first into the wall like he weighed nothing. This time it was impossible to ignore the way the plastic of his mask cracked. As he dimly registered the plastic shards digging into the soft skin under his right eye, he also noticed the distinct lack of anything resting against his face at all. Instead, there was a new weight against his neck where the plastic remains of the mask weighed down the straps, all resting against his clavicles.

In a brief moment of clarity, a spike of fear shot through him, freezing him in place where he leaned on his hands for support, still facing the wall. The second he turned around was the second he lit the fire that burned what little chances of a happy life he had left to grasp at. Then the static pulsed with a flare of pain from *everything* and the moment was over.

He couldn't stop now anyway.

The sounds of Spectre and The Handler fighting was joined by Dream’s voice calling out in warning, a single gunshot making Tommy flinch no matter how hard he tried not to.

It was too similar. The pain of plastic shrapnel in his face. The biting cold of the rain and concrete. The indistinguishable ache in his whole body and the swirling mixture of exhaustion and fear.

He let the foul taste of self loathing at his own weakness burn into its own kind of indignant rage that fueled him as he pushed off the wall to return to the fray with the finishing move. He couldn’t afford to be anything but *angry* right now. Rage and spite were Tommy’s real superpower and he couldn’t let them fall to the wayside when they were the only reason he was still standing.

He wanted to fall by his own terms tonight, not anyone else's.

The Handler must have been struggling to hold his own against two heroes while also controlling another body because The Blade didn’t even move to block as Tommy made the highest snap kick he could, catching the bottom of the skull mask with the tip of his boot and ripped through the straps, the mask falling to the ground.

Techno’s emotionless face and glowing pink eyes stared back at him as Tommy’s foot found the ground once more. There were red bruises forming across the bridge of his nose, across his cheek bones and on his temples from where Tommy had kicked the mask the first time. His nose was sluggishly bleeding.

Tommy doubted his face was much to look at at the moment but the blank look on The Blade on Techno’s face made his stomach twist uncomfortably. He didn’t even realize that he had frozen to stare until the mistake was already coming back to bite him in the ass.

Techno’s expression didn’t change as he abruptly lunged for Tommy, his gloved hands wrapping around Tommy’s throat and slamming him back into the wall for the nth time in a

row. Though this time he pinned Tommy to the wall and held him at arm's length, the pressure building around his throat was enough to cut off his airflow.

Tommy clutched desperately at the hands around his throat with one hand and struggled to reach out with his other only to find his fingers falling just inches short of Techno's face. He only gave up once black spots began to gather in the corners of his vision and switched to using both hands to pry at the fingers around his neck.

"Back off or he kills the kid!" The Handler was shouting somewhere. "He dies and you fall back under my control!"

"Then do it already!" Dream's voice rang out from the opposite direction. "You'd be doing everyone a favour in the long run! One less vigilante—"

"Dream! Look out—" a gunshot went off and Tommy's ability to understand what they were saying went with it, his ears ringing sharply.

He still didn't give up fighting as he finally managed to wiggle his hands under Techno's, wrapping both of Techno's thumbs in one hand each and twisting them in opposite directions, breaking the grip around his throat.

Tommy gasped in a weak breath as the pressure lifted but tightened his grip to make sure Techno's hands were getting further from his neck still, not closer. But really all Tommy needed was to lean forward those extra few inches for his fingertips to brush against Techno's bruised cheek.

All at once the arms holding Tommy went limp and he careened forward into a broad chest, his head barely landing on Techno's shoulder instead of headbutting him.

Those same arms wrapped around Tommy and he couldn't help but flinch, tucking in closer to Techno's body as his head continued to pound and his ears rang so bad he wondered if he had gone deaf.

But the arms did not crush him. They did not grab him and throw him. They did not hurt him. Techno's arms settled gently against his back, one hand coming up to gently cup the back of his head.

"It's alright Theseus, just breathe," Techno whispered in his ear. Or maybe he didn't whisper at all and it sounded muffled through the ringing and static. "You're safe now," he said, "I've got you."

And just like that Tommy's resolve and anger crumbled and left him in a single, wretched sob that was met with a rumbling hum and gentle fingers toying with the ends of his soaked hair.

"I've got you," Techno promised again as Tommy's legs finally gave out. The arms were gentle as they wrapped around him, supporting his weight. Techno lowered them both to the ground carefully, but every touch burned like lava against his warzone of injuries.

His resolve fled with whatever had helped him to ignore his injuries. Everything became a swirling blur of shouting and movement. One moment the whole world was just Techno's arms around him and his head buried in a slick rain jacket and the next he was alone, resting gently against the same wall that was responsible for the way his vision spun and head pounded.

He blinked, not quite able to focus on the heroes and the man—men? They were fighting. At one point he saw Dream kick someone's hand and then there was the clattering on metal on the ground next to him.

Tommy blinked and then he was looking down at a gun on the ground next to him.

He didn't want to laugh anymore when he looked at it, even if it was still a little funny. His fingers brushed the metal of the barrel and twitched at the heat still coming from it. It was like it was proof of the live rounds still in it, just waiting to warm the weapon further. His hand moved lower, aching, bruised fingers wrapping around the grip until the weight of the weapon rested fully in his palm.

"Theseus?" The Blade's voice drew his attention back to the scene across the alley.

The Handler was laying on the ground, pinned down by Dream's boot digging between his shoulder blades while Spectre leaned heavily against the other wall, hand clutching tight against his side, face screwed up in pain. Techno was standing next to Dream, looking between the gun in Tommy's hand and his pinched face.

Tommy ignored Techno and as his gaze settled back on The Handler's now unmasked face. Suddenly Tommy remembered what his entire goal had been for the past week. He had been hunting his hunter, hoping to kill the man before he could hurt anyone else.

But obviously, a lot of factors had changed since then. Most of the people the mercenary had threatened weren't even half as helpless or innocent as Tommy had thought and Tommy obviously wasn't cut out to do any kind of hunting right now.

But he had the gun in his hand and one of his tormentors right in front of him. He couldn't help but wonder if the gun even had two bullets left, he'd hate to waste his only shot.

Dream wasn't glaring at him anymore, instead giving him the same odd look Techno was. "Hey kid, why don't you just put—"

He cut himself off as Tommy raised the gun, closing one eye to settle the crosshair over The Handler's face in his line of sight. Or maybe Dream continued to speak and Tommy couldn't hear him as his blood rushed in his ears again.

The Handler's mouth moved as he said something but Tommy couldn't hear it. Techno took a slow step toward Tommy and his grip on the weapon tightened so much his hands started to shake. Or maybe they were just shaking.

Tommy wasn't Tubbo. He didn't have the kind of level headedness it took to be sure your every action was for the right reason, no matter the cost. He wasn't Ranboo, who always

seemed to know when something was the right choice or going too far. He wasn't Crumb who never seemed to hesitate in the face of danger and always knew what she believed in.

He was Tommy. Inconsistent, rash, angry and scared all the fucking time. He had a gun in his hand and an enemy in front of him and he wasn't even sure if he could pull the trigger even when he knew he wouldn't have to face the consequences afterwards.

He didn't even realize he was crying until the gun's sight blurred too much to see what he was aiming at anymore.

He could hear someone laughing as he slowly pulled his fingers off the trigger and more tears blurred his vision as he blinked his other eye open. He couldn't even bring himself to shoot the guy that ran Wilbur off a bridge and straight into the hospital. What a joke.

Slowly the gun lowered and he could hear people still talking but didn't register the words. He glared at Techno's blurry shape as it took a hesitant step closer before closing his eyes and leaning his head back against the wall.

He hoped someone would forgive him for what he was about to do.

Tommy flinched when two gunshots abruptly went off and echoed over the bricks and rain. He blinked his eyes open to find Spectre and Dream arguing over the motionless body of The Handler on the ground between them. His eyes followed the gun in Spectre's hand and Dream snatched it from him and the weapon vanished in a green flash of light.

Oh. When had Tommy stopped erasing their powers?

In the corner of his vision, Techno took another hesitant step toward him and Tommy bit his lip almost painfully hard.

Now or never.

He closed his eyes again as he tipped his head back and pressed the still warm barrel of the gun under his chin as his fingers searched blindly for the trigger.

"Tommy!"

Boots scuffed loudly against the wet concrete as someone else shouted. His finger caught on the trigger just as hands closed around his wrist and he pressed down hard, praying he was faster than whoever was trying to stop him.

He wasn't.

The hands around him jerked his arm and the gun to the side just as it discharged. The concussive sound made Tommy's entire head feel like it was drop-kicked off a building but it was a distinctly *alive* feeling of someone that still had a head to hurt.

He sobbed as the weapon was torn from his hands and nearly screamed in pent up frustration and pain as arms circled his shoulders to draw him into a gentle hug.

He cried and sobbed miserably into Techno's dark rain jacket and the man never complained once, just gently shushing him and rumbling quiet assurances into the ear he could still hear out of. Tommy wanted to hate it. He wanted to hate Techno for stopping him, for being so kind to him right now. He wanted them to go back to being Theseus and The Blade, and wanted that layer of masks between them so they could be different people. He just wanted this mess to be over, he wished that none of it ever happened.

But he didn't hate it. He didn't hate Techno because Techno was holding him like he was something precious that he didn't want to break and Tommy was in desperate fucking need of this hug.

"I've got you, kid," Techno hummed, running his fingers soothingly up and down the nape of Tommy's neck. "It's okay, I've gotcha."

This time Tommy let himself believe the promise was true.

Chapter End Notes

In all seriousness, suicidal thoughts and tendencies are no joke. If you're struggling with anything like that don't hesitate to reach out for help where ever you feel comfortable with <3

And on a lighter note, you don't have to wait a month for the next chapter! I've been more active on Twitter recently and let my followers vote for weekly or bi-weekly updates since I have a few drafts lined up and they voted for weekly! They also voted for Friday to be the new update day so if you want to participate in polls that influence things about the fic consider [Following me on Twitter](#) :D

I also occasionally rant to the [One Mistake discord server](#) about writing things and sharing snippets or spoilers without context memes so if you want to get in on that or just need another server to hang out on consider joining!

If you've made it this far or leave a kudo and comment even if its just to scream gibberish or cry about the chapter <3

See you next Friday!

Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Techno gets Tommy to the safehouse.

Chapter Notes

Mmm one more step into the plot. But also have some kinda-almost fluff <3

Thank you all so much for all the comments and kudos, they give me life. And as always thank you to my wonderful editor for helping out with this chapter.

Enjoy!

TW/CW: Mentions of suicide attempt(s), description of injuries

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Technoblade was shaking.

He personally felt that it was a reasonable reaction. Frankly, at this point, it might have been more concerning if he *wasn't* on the verge of some kind of mental break, not that he was usually one for that kind of thing. But...this was a lot.

Tommy was also shaking as he curled tighter against Techno's chest, his sobs more than loud enough to drown out Dream and Spectre's quiet bickering. He didn't even bother looking at them, instead whispering quiet assurances into Tommy's hair and resisting the urge to draw the broken boy closer, to crush him in a hug hard enough to reassure himself that Tommy was *okay*.

He wasn't obviously. Nobody that's okay tries to shoot themselves.

People that are okay don't try to kill themselves.

It was almost ironic when he thought about it. When he and Wilbur had fought about Tommy at the hospital, Techno had written off Wilbur's fears. He had told himself that he knew what suicidal depression looked like after watching Wilbur live through it for years, he had been so caught up with Tommy's strange, secret past that it had honestly been the least of his worries at the time. Everyone was depressed about something, but in the circles they ran in, it just came with the territory. But Tommy's secret past being *Theseus*?

No wonder he was suicidal, he had probably been borderline for years with the way he recklessly jumped into fights as a vigilante. Techno had spent the better part of the last three years trying to stop the kid from getting in too deep and somehow it led them to this.

Theseus— *Tommy*— was practically boneless as he melted into Techno's chest with pained sobs and hiccups wracking his soaked, lanky frame. The gun sat abandoned not even three feet from them, still loaded with its barrel pointed their way.

Techno's mouth tasted like iron and blood trickled sluggishly from his nose. It was probably broken, considering how hard Tommy had to kick him to get the mask off his face, but the pain was a single drop in the ocean of agony swirling in his head.

BLOOD GOD

BLOODBLOODBLOODBLOOD

BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD

YOUR BLOOD

*HE STOLE YOUR KILL
TECHNOPROTECT*

BLOOD

DARK MAGIC

HE SHOULD BE DEAD

SAVE HIM

BLOOD

THESEUS

HELP HIM

THE THIEF DID THIS

RUN

*HIDE
TRAITOR*

PROTECT

*BLOODBLOOD **BLOOD**—*

BLOOD GOD

PROTECT THE RUNT

BLOOD

It was damn near impossible to tell where the voices ended and where his screaming piglin instincts began. He knew that after his experience with Trigger he was likely to develop hybrid instincts along with the physical traits, but this was so much worse than he could have imagined. Maybe the voices made it worse or maybe it was always going to be like this, but either way, it was making it *very* hard to think clearly.

“— *Techno*, ” someone was saying insistently. Someone that *wasn't* in his head.

It took a lot of effort to not wrap Tommy tighter in his arms. While the action would be reassuring and grounding, probably for both of them on some level, he also knew he couldn't risk worsening any of the kid's injuries. Instead, he took a few deep breaths before raising his head to look across the alley at Dream and Spectre.

Spectre was sitting on the ground now, his back to the other alley wall and his knees drawn up to his chest as he rested his crossed arms on them. His head rested on his forearms while his eyes fixed almost blankly on the body of the man he had just killed. He looked devastated, which was understandable considering Techno was pretty sure George had tried to maintain a no-killing rule even after all these years.

Dream was crouched next to him, one hand resting on George's shoulder as the other waved to get Techno's attention.

“Hey man, you with me?” Dream said, his eyes catching the low light strangely without his mask to cover it.

Techno forced another deep breath, trying to focus on the real sounds around them instead of the demanding ones in his head. Tommy's sobbing was quieter now, but he still occasionally winced or hiccuped in pain. The wind was still whistling quietly through the empty streets, backed by the now lighter sounds of rain as the intensity of the storm began to die down.

There were also sirens echoing in the distance now. Not a great response time but he wasn't going to complain about things working in their favour.

“Techno,” Dream spoke again, “I need your car keys but if I come over there I'm pretty sure you're gonna stab me so please say you can hear me.”

“Why do you need the car,” he huffed, turning his attention back to Tommy and trying his best to ignore the way the voices surged. Techno started to gently shift so he could pick Tommy up without seriously aggravating any of his injuries.

“I need the car because legally you and I had no reason or right to be here which means that George and I have a body to hide and you don't really seem like you're in any condition to drive,” Dream explained almost clinically.

Techno frowned, considering what the next step here was. He needed to get Tommy somewhere safe and while a hospital would be the best place to get him patched up, it would just put him back on Schlatt's radar the second the cops knew. He glanced at the street on the

other side of the alley, recognizing one of the small storefronts immediately. Phil's safehouse was closer than the car anyway.

He shifted Tommy's weight to one arm and the boy went willingly. Techno dug into his pocket and retrieved his keys and phone. "Take it back to my apartment when you're done," he said, tossing the keys to the other hero. "There should be a tarp in the spare tire compartment that's in the trunk and you can put the backseats down to make more space."

Dream caught the keys with a frown. "You're not coming with? I can take you to a hospital ___"

"No," Techno cut him off. He moved his arms so that one supported Tommy's back and the other hooked under his legs before lifting him up off the ground. Tommy whimpered but made no move to fight his hold or complain about the pain. "I need time to patch him up and get him off the grid before you turn us in," he said, turning to make his way out of the alley. "Have a good life, Dream."

Techno barely made it two steps before Dream called after him. "Techno wait!"

He stopped but didn't turn to look back. Instead, his eyes fell on Tommy's face, tracing every bruise, cut and scrape on it as the voices screamed for vengeance and blood.

He almost wanted to give in and feed their desires, but getting Tommy somewhere safe was more important.

"Unless you're about to say you're *not* planning on turning him in, then I don't want to hear it."

The length of silence that followed was more than enough of an answer.

Techno said nothing more as he started walking again. Behind him, he could hear Dream and Spectre speaking again in hushed tones, but soon enough the sound of sirens drowned them out. He wasn't really worried about the cops catching them though, with Spectre's powers they could move the body while the cops were staring right at them, and no one would ever know. What he was worried about was getting himself and Tommy back to the safehouse before they started to search the rest of the area, so he quickened his steps as much as he dared with an injured teenager in his arms.

Now, Techno knew Phil had things he didn't talk about. He knew that Phil was one of the last vigilantes to hold out against hero licensing before mysteriously vanishing for a year, then coming back as Tempest. He knew that the safehouse was a carry over from those times and Techno had all the routes there memorized by the time he was thirteen because of his father's lingering paranoia. He also logically knew that Phil must have had a life before his cushy hero salary and that even had a wife at one point.

But some part of him still found it jarring to open the creaky door to an incredibly dusty, fully furnished apartment that looked frozen in time.

It was about the size of any one-bedroom apartment you'd expect to find in this part of the city; it had a single central room with a couch and slightly outdated television with a single door on the right wall and a bathroom door and kitchenette through an open doorway on the other. Heavy curtains covered the single window on the far wall, bathing the room in darkness while also protecting the room from prying eyes.

Faces of a much younger Phil and many people Techno didn't know stared back from grimy picture frames lining the walls as he kicked the door shut behind him and made his way inside, Tommy still tucked into his chest. It took some maneuvering but he managed to slip the dust cover off the worn leather and deposit Tommy on the couch without too much trouble.

He rested two fingers against Tommy's pulse point as he went to examine the boy's face and was surprised to see that he was still awake. The surprise quickly soured to concern as he realized Tommy wasn't even looking at him, instead, his eyes were glazed over as he stared blankly at the ceiling.

Techno's jaw clenched as he snapped a few times in front of Tommy's face and gently called his name. He didn't react, his eyes not even tracking the movement of Techno's hand as it pulled away. The only reassurance he had was Tommy's fluttering pulse under his fingers since the heavy vest and layers he wore made it very hard to see the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed.

OH GODS NOT HIM

DONT DIE THESEUS

IS HIS EAR BLEEDING???

WTF I was busy what the heck did I MISS???

HANG IN THERE THESEUS

HE NEED A HOSPITAL HE HIT HIS HEAD SO MANY TIMES

LOOK FOR THE FIRST AID KID

GET HIM A HEALING POTION

HOLD ON THESEUS

SAVE HIM

Techno didn't really need to be told twice. As loud and intrusive as the voices were, Techno's own mind was apparently scattered to the winds right now so he didn't mind the suggestions.

First aid kit, he could do that.

As old and untouched as this place was, there was no way Phil wouldn't have it stocked to the brim with essentials. Even if it had been ten years since he was last here there would

probably still be a few healing potions in the first aid kits. Hell, if it really had been that long then it was an even higher chance there would be some. They had only fallen out of the practice of keeping potions on hand in the last few years after magic regulations tightened them into a fully controlled substance.

He aimed for the kitchenette first, figuring the bigger kit would be under the sink, just like it was in Phil's own house, and was not disappointed.

The kit was a hard-shelled box filled with neatly organized stacks of bandages, gauze pads, and plenty of assorted medical supplies that you wouldn't normally find outside of a hospital. And tucked into one corner, three healing potions.

He snagged one and moved to the cabinets to retrieve a glass which, upon inspection, he made sure to rinse it out before pouring out half of the potion and watering it down till the glass was full.

Techno hated how the movements were becoming familiar after having done the exact same for Ranboo not even a few weeks prior—

Oh right. He needed to call Ranboo and sort out the Dream thing. Probably now, it wasn't actually that late so the kid should still be awake.

He groaned and turned to trudge back into the living room as the voices continued their endless shouting in his mind.

RANBOO

RANSAD

THESEUS

HELP

POOR KIDS

BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD

When was the last time anyone checked in Ranboo??

After crumb died lmao

NOT CRUMB

Oh shit is he okay???

WHO CARES TOMMYS SURE AS HELL NOT

It took a little bit of coaxing but he eventually got Tommy sitting up on his own and helped lift the glass of healing potion to his lips.

Much like with Ranboo, the effects were almost immediate: the fog started to clear from Tommy's eyes and some colour returned to his face. Unlike Ranboo, however, his expression suddenly twisted with pain as the concussion faded enough for his brain to actually register the ache of his other injuries.

"Fuckin' hell," Tommy hissed, his eyes screwed shut as one hand went to clutch at the still-open trident wound on his leg.

Techno sighed in relief as concerns about brain damage and the possibility of Tommy slipping into a coma mostly ebbed away. As much as he wanted to give the kid an entire healing potion, he knew it would do more harm than good in the long run as many of his other injuries would heal wrong if they weren't properly cleaned or set first.

"C'mon Theseus, let's move you to the bathroom so we're not wrecking the couch too bad," he said, moving to take Tommy's hands only to have them slapped away.

"Don't call me that—" his voice cracked as he leaned away from Techno. *"You can't— don't call me that—"* he cut himself off with a sob before he even finished the thought, head tipping back against the couch.

Techno's hands hovered awkwardly in the air between them as he sat frozen. He really *really* didn't want to have a conversation about this yet, and especially now. But he knew they couldn't go back from this as the realization fully sunk in.

Tommy was *Theseus* .

And Techno was The Blade.

"Why don't you want me to call you...that?" He managed after a painfully long moment. After another second of hesitation, his hands returned to his own lap, still crouching next to the couch.

"B-because you're not— you can't be *him*," Tommy sobbed, hands coming up to press the heels of his palms to his eyes as tears tried to stream past. "I— I don't *want* you to be him. *Please*," he sobbed the last word out and Techno was reintroduced to the meaning of heartbreak as he felt a physical pang in his chest.

"I'm sorry," he replied after a moment, though it sounded lame even to himself.

The voices made their discontent known but he ignored them, keeping his focus on Tommy as he barked out a pained laugh.

"Sorry? What fu-fucking good does that do? You're— I don't—" he laughed again, cutting himself off. "Tech-Techno teaches me how to cook and helps me with homework a-and The Blade fucking tried to kill me the first time we met and spent the next few years *hunting* me. I don't—" he sobbed *"this isn't fair."*

It wasn't fair, but if there was one thing life had taught Techno over the years, it was that few things rarely were. What mattered was how you reacted.

"You're right," he replied. Slowly he pushed to his feet and settled on the couch, leaving space between them. "It's not fair, but it is true. I'm The Blade and you're Theseus, there's no changing that fact."

"Stop—"

"But what we *can* change right now is that you're still bleeding, and maybe you don't care about that right now but I do. And I know that Wilbur *definitely* will and if I don't get you patched up before he gets here, he's gonna kill both of us."

Tommy repeated that same hysterical, broken laugh from earlier as his hands fell to his sides. "Good!" He cried a bit too loud in the quiet of the abandoned apartment. "I don't know if you fucking noticed b-but I'm so fucking *done* Techno. I—I can't do this anymore. I don't want to *be* here and I'm tired of fighting and I-I don't want to put anyone else in danger and— and *I'm so tired* . I just want this to be over but you stopped me and now I don't know what to do b-because I'm fucked! Dream knows and he's- he's gonna tell everyone and then it's just gonna be jail or something worse and you wouldn't even let me—"

"Tommy stop," he snapped suddenly. "You don't have to worry about the Dream thing, okay? I've got it covered. Just take a breath and— and this is gonna sound crazy, I know— *trust* me, okay? I've got you and I'm not going to let anyone else hurt you again, I promi—"

"No!" Tommy shouted as he shot to his feet and whipped around to fix Techno with a withering glare. "Don't fuckin'— don't make promises you *can't keep* ..." his voice trailed off into a pained hiss as what little colour the healing potion had returned drained from his face and he swayed unsteadily on his feet.

Techno didn't wait to see if the kid was gonna fall before standing to steady him, ignoring the weak protests he was met with. He slipped one of Tommy's arms over his shoulder and turned them towards the bathroom door.

"Okay, fine," he sighed as he managed to slowly get Tommy to stumble under his own power. "We can talk about this when we've had a little time to heal and cool off okay? But what you're gonna do right now is sit still and let me patch you up without fighting me, 'kay?"

"Fuck you," Tommy hissed in reply, though he made no moves to actually protest as Techno flicked on the bathroom light and helped him settle on the closed toilet seat.

Techno would take a swearing and pissy Tommy over a crying and silent one any day of the week. Even if he truly hated Techno, a mad Tommy was a living one.

It took a bit of one sided convincing to make sure Tommy wasn't going to pass out or do anything stupid before Techno was off to grab the first aid kit and see if there was anything he could find in the way of dry clothes.

Call ranboo

RANBOO

FUCK DREAM KICK HIS ASS

BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD

Give Tommy one of your shirts it'll be funny he's so small

This apartment is suspiciously clean for an abandoned unit in this neighbourhood

Haunted apartment pog

NOT POG ITS SAD

You know who else is probably sad? Ranboo KEKW

FIND MEMOIR

This is so fucked

GO BACK MAKE SURE THESEUS IS OKAY

Call Endwalker seriously dude

Right. Call Ranboo, find clothes, get the first aid kit. He could do that.

He put his phone on speaker as he ducked into the bedroom, frowning at the empty mattress covered by a white dust cover like the rest of the furniture in the apartment. He'd have to make the bed after he patched up Tommy.

Ranboo picked up on the third ring.

"...Hello?" he said hesitantly, confusion clear in his voice.

"Hey kid, do you still have any way to contact your vigilante or rogue buddies? Or Memoir, more specifically?"

"I— is this a conversation we should be having over the phone?"

Techno considered it for a moment. Probably not honestly, but they had bigger, more immediate problems than that. "No, but this is too important. Good news: Wilbur and I found Tommy and got him somewhere safe. Bad news: Dream and Spectre both know his identity now, and knowing Dream it won't take him long to connect the dots on you too. We've got a few hours before we really have to worry about them snitching but the sooner it's dealt with ___"

"The better. Right." Ranboo let out a long sigh and Techno couldn't help but follow suit.

He gave up looking in the empty dresser drawers and moved to the small closet in the corner of the room. The door opened on creaking hinges to reveal three identical duffel bags resting on the floor, the only differences being the strips of green, blue and red tape on the side of each bag respectively.

“So you still have any contacts or...” Techno prompted as he snagged the strap of the red bag and tossed it on the bed.

“Yeah I do,” Ranboo replied. “Do you have any more specific info to help find them or am I flying blind on this?”

Techno’s hand paused on the zipper of the bag and he resisted the urge to sigh. Damn vigilante kids not knowing how to ask for help.

“Just give me the contacts and I’ll work it out,” he clarified. “You’ve been through enough, I’m not gonna ask you to do something this risky when you’re so close to leaving it behind for good.”

He was met with a long moment of silence as he unpacked the duffel bag and sorted through the tightly packed clothes and resources.

It was kind of unnerving honestly, he always knew Phil was a little paranoid but this was a whole different level of preparation than Techno had expected from his old man.

“As much as I wish I could let you handle it, the contact I have left is practically inaccessible to anyone but me and if someone else were to use it he wouldn’t take the call,” Ranboo started to argue, much to Techno’s disappointment. *“Plus it’s going to be ten times faster for the guy that can teleport to track them down. And I think Tommy needs all the protection he can get right now and you leaving isn’t going to really help in that department.”*

Techno didn’t answer for a moment as his mind was flooded with a wave of voices screaming at him to pick out the pink hoodie with the cartoon pig on it for Tommy. As much as he disagreed with their fashion taste and was sure Tommy would too, they didn’t shut up until it was in his hand with the rest of the clothes he had already selected.

He stared down at the pile as the voices receded and considered Ranboo’s point. He was right, of course. There was no telling when Wilbur or Phil would be here to help watch over Tommy and even then no guarantee he could get the rogues and vigilantes to work with him on such short notice. And Ranboo was probably one of the only people in the city who had a chance at successfully ambushing Dream and Spectre to stop them from getting back to Dream’s agency.

He sighed. “They’re in my Mercedes SUV looking for a place to hide a body,” Techno reluctantly informed him as he turned towards the door to go retrieve the first aid kit. “I don’t know where exactly they’re going to go with it but I told them to take it back to my apartment when they’re done. Though all things considered, I doubt he’s gonna follow through on that.”

“They’re... since when do heroes need to hide bodies?”

“Technically? Since always, but this is a new one for Dream and Spectre to my knowledge. Dream and I went off the books to look for Spectre after he went missing and when we finally found him it was a trap for Tommy. Spectre ended up killing the guy that set the trap and as much as Dream doesn’t like me, he also doesn’t want to lose his hero license.”

“This is so messed up,” Ranboo groaned.

Techno couldn’t even find it in himself to chuckle as he spotted the half-empty healing potion on the counter still. “Yeah,” he agreed grimly. “You need anything else or is that enough to work with?”

“Give me the car’s make, model and plate, and maybe your apartment’s address and I should have it dealt with by the end of the night,” Ranboo said with a startling amount of confidence. *“I’m not the only one with a vested interest in making sure Tommy’s identity goes to the grave with the few that still know.”*

Techno tossed the pile of clothes on top of the open kit and balanced his phone on top of it all. He rattled off the information to Ranboo as he picked up the kit with both arms and made his way back towards the bathroom.

“Alright, thanks for coming to me, I have to get moving as soon as possible so just... make sure Tommy’s safe. I— I don’t want to lose anyone else.”

“Yeah, me neither kid. Sorry to dump this on you, though. If I had any other way—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Ranboo cut in. *“Um, stay safe I guess.”*

“Uh, you too. Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

The line went dead just as he pushed back into the bathroom where Tommy was just as he had left him.

If Tommy had overheard his conversation with Ranboo through the thin walls, he made no indication of knowing or caring, instead staring blankly at the wall across from him and his whole body was wracked with shivers and his teeth audibly chattered.

“Alright,” Techno said quietly, trying not to startle Tommy as he set down the kit and started shifting things around, “let’s see what we can do about those injuries.”

With some coaxing and patience, Techno managed to get Tommy out of his soaked clothes and layers of body armour to reveal a map of darkening bruises all over his torso highlighted with already bandaged and aggravated wounds on his sides and across his back. It only took a little bit of poking and prodding to see that his obviously out-of-place ribs would have to wait to be treated last.

“Good thing I didn’t give you the whole healing pot,” he sighed, running his fingers over an obviously displaced rib just hard enough to make Tommy wince.

“Why? Just so you could watch me suffer more?” Tommy spat back, seeming a little more coherent than before.

“The potion healed your concussion and probably some more of the internal damage from Dream usin’ you like a pinata, but it seems like it also went far enough to start healin’ your ribs even though they’re in the wrong place still,” Techno explained. “Sorry this is gonna hurt but I need to see what we’re working with here.”

“Sorry for— OW YOU SON OF A *BITCH*! What the hell?!” He cried out as Techno pressed a little harder against the break. Luckily there wasn’t a lot of flex on the knot of the break site, so there wouldn’t be any danger of splinter fracturing if he had to reset it himself.

“The bones have already started to mend together in the wrong place, but it shouldn’t be too hard to rebreak them and set ‘em properly,” he said, quickly retracting his hands as Tommy swatted at them angrily.

“You gotta rebreak my ribs like fuckin’ Twilight or some shit? That’s gonna hurt *so* much worse than you think it is,” he complained with an almost petulant glare.

Techno frowned. “When did they have to rebreak someone's ribs in Twilight?”

Tommy rolled his eyes. “Fuckin— one of the werewolf dudes heals so fast that his ribs are fucked up by the time they get him back and they have to, like, torture him to fix it or something. I don’t know, I haven't seen it in years.”

Techno’s lips twitched slightly as he reached for a pair of fabric scissors, his eyes locked on the trident wound on Tommy’s thigh that was still sluggishly bleeding. “I’ve never seen it. Can’t believe you just admitted to watching Twilight, nerd.”

“Wha— man fuck you! I don’t fuckin’ *like* them it's just one of those series that's fun to binge-watch every once and a while, like Hunger Games or something.”

“Hunger Games is actually *good* though,” Techno argued mildly. “How attached are you to these pants?”

“They’re fucked anyway just cut ‘em. Hunger Games is actually so funny to binge though, the budget between movies increases so drastically that the peacekeepers look different in like all of them.”

“The books were better anyway,” he said with a smile as he started to cut away the leg of Tommy’s cargo pants to get a better look at the wound underneath.

He didn’t even have to see Tommy’s face to hear the slight smile in his voice. “Yeah, hence why it belongs on the same binge list as Twilight.”

“Are you implying that the Twilight books are actually *good*?”

“No! Oh my gods you’re not even listening to me—”

They went back and forth like that for a while Techno slowly treated all of Tommy's injuries, new and old. Despite how concerning the layers and layers of bruises in different stages of healing and random scabs and scars were, the process was still reassuring in some way. Tommy was battered and obviously broken in more ways than one, but he was still alive. He was still here to heal from these injuries and distract Tommy enough to put aside the shitty evening they'd already had just to argue about movie franchises.

Techno would be a liar if he said he wasn't playing into it out of his own desire to avoid more pressing topics. He'd honestly be content if the whole Theseus and The Blade thing never came up again and if agreeing to watch all the Twilight movies was what it took to avoid it for just a little longer, he could grit his teeth and bear it.

Eventually, all the wounds were cleaned and dressed and Tommy seemed coherent and content enough that Techno left him to get changed into a fresh set of clothes and went in search of a set of his own. When they met back up in the kitchen the voices broke into coos and laughter at the sight of Tommy drowning in the oversized pink hoodie and he was giving Techno his best death glare.

"You're a fuckin' dickhead, you know that?" he snarled, though there was no real heat behind it as he limped to Techno's side at the counter.

Techno smirked and turned back to the collection of pill bottles on the counter. "Sorry."

"No you're not."

"No, I'm not. You look very comfortable and that was the warmest sweater I could find in the emergency grab-and-go bag," he replied easily as he squinted at the bottles labels to try and figure out which pills would be strong enough to take the edge off of broken bones without being a blood thinner in case the concussion was still lingering.

Tommy leaned back against the counter and watched him in silence for a moment. "You need your glasses to read those, don't you?" he asked.

Techno blinked at the labels once more and gave in with a sigh. "Out of all things a hybrid transformation could have given me, worse eyesight was probably the last thing I considered being a possibility."

Tommy laughed weakly, but the awkward strain was obvious even in his voice. "Win some, you lose some I guess," he muttered, reaching over to slide the bottles over towards him. "What are you looking for?"

"Nothing with aspirin or ibuprofen. Preferably acetaminophen with codeine or something stronger if we have it. Just stay away from the anti-inflammatories or blood thinners."

Tommy hummed, quickly trading out the bottles and setting them into two piles as he skimmed over their labels. "I dunno man, I'm feeling pretty fuckin' inflamed 'n shit."

"You also probably still have a concussion so I'm not gonna let you take anything that could make that worse," he replied.

“Lame,” Tommy grumbled but made no real arguments otherwise.

After a moment of consideration, Techno moved to the cabinets to see what kind of foods were stocked up there. It didn’t take long to determine almost everything was canned or dry goods in sealed plastic and glass containers. Though to his surprise, there seemed to be a decent amount of baking supplies and cookware to go with it.

“When was the last time you ate?” Techno asked, frowning at a single can of Alphagettis hidden in a pile of tomato sauces.

“At Wil’s,” Tommy answered distractedly. “Okay, I’ve got a high dose acetaminophen-codeine and some other definitely not over-the-counter thing that doesn’t *seem* to have any blood thinners that I know of. What do you think?”

“Just take the codeine, the other one will probably knock you out for a while. You hungry?”

Tommy opened one of the bottles and shook two pills out into his hand. “Not really. My stomach is still kinda fucked, not gonna lie.”

“That’s fair,” Techno sighed.

He watched from the corner of his eye as Tommy took both pills dry and then just...stood there staring off into space. An awkward silence fell between them and Techno didn’t have the first clue where to pick it up.

Eventually, Tommy took the lead and cleared his throat. “So what is this place anyway? We didn’t like, break into someone’s house did we? Cause this doesn’t look like any safehouse I’ve ever used before.”

Techno found himself looking at the picture on the small shelf above the sink as he answered. “I’m pretty sure this is Phil’s old apartment, from before he was a hero.” The photograph looked like it was taken the same day as the picture on Phil’s desk at his home office, Kristin in a casual white dress with Phil’s rumpled suit jacket tucked over her shoulders dating it as their wedding day nearly 20 years ago.

Kristin died at the ripe age of 21, two years after that picture was taken, and that was where Techno’s knowledge about the woman ended. Phil never talked about it unprompted and, unlike Wilbur, Techno had never really asked much about it.

Tommy laughed weakly. “That’s so weird to think about. Tempest has been a hero like, my entire life. Hard to believe there was a time before I guess.”

“Yeah,” Techno agreed. “Pretty weird.”

For some reason, he couldn’t look away from the photo.

This time when the air between them fell quiet it was nearly deafening and that was what made Techno realize the voices had gone completely silent ever since he turned to look at the photo.

“Man, who *is* that?” Tommy said, suddenly next to him and staring at the photo over the sink. “She looks so familiar but I can’t put my finger on it.”

“That’s Phil’s wife, Kristin,” Techno said, finally tearing his eyes away to look at Tommy. “He had a photo of her on his desk at home, you’ve probably seen it before.”

Tommy frowned, his eyes still locked on the picture. “Maybe,” he said after a moment. Another beat and he turned away from the photo to look at Techno. “Anyway, I’m bored. Are you gonna let me sleep or try to entertain me for the next twenty-four hours because of my concussion?”

The voices slowly trickled back in, offering suggestions of activities or begging him to go to sleep. Notably, none called for blood at the moment.

“Well,” Techno said, scratching the back of his neck as he looked around the kitchen once more, “you a fan of baking?”

Another moment of silence as Tommy stared at him, the exhaustion on his face almost comically contrasting with the brightness of his hoodie and the soft look his oversized clothes gave him.

“You’re kidding right?”

Chapter End Notes

Never a dull moment with bedrock bros <3

I'm trying to speedrun rewriting the next chapter but I promise there will still be another chapter next week! Also, there's now apparently a denial cult in my [Discord server](#) that argues Crumb is alive so go see how long that lasts lmao.

Follow me on [Twitter](#) if you'd like as well, I occasionally post polls that influence this fic and out of context spoiler memes when I'm in a silly goofy mood.

If you've made it this far please leave a kudo and comment if you wish to shout at me or just keysmash into the void <3

Anyway see you next week for a shake-up in pacing with a surprise pov!

Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Despite their best efforts, Tommy and Techno have a talk. Philza and Wilbur head towards the safehouse.

Chapter Notes

Haha sorry about that random break... I was trying to rewrite something but ended up switching around the chapters in the end. So I lied there's no huge pov shift this time lmao.

Thank you all so much for all the comments and kudos, it's so awesome to see old readers sticking around and new readers catching up. And as always thank you to my wonderful editor for the help <3

Same TWs as the last chapter, it's kind of a given from here on.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Baking with Tommy somehow wasn't as much of a disaster as Techno had been expecting.

Of course, it was still kind of a disaster. Either Tommy was genuinely in a better mood or trying to mask his true feelings by being extra annoying, but Techno wasn't *really* going to complain about it. Tommy was being just loud and aggravating enough, as he complained about wanting both cookies and focaccia bread, that the voices finally called it quits for the night. It was pleasant as the endless chatter faded into a background murmur, drowned out almost completely by the boy's voice.

But of course, since Techno figured Tommy was just faking his boy-serious persona, he agreed to the horrible decision to make focaccia dough and chocolate chip cookies at the same time. It ended with an ungodly amount of flour all over both their clothes and the counters, but after about an hour they had two sheets of cookies going in the oven and one sheet of dough resting in the fridge for later.

It was only once Techno set about trying to clean up some of their combined mess that Tommy's little burst of energy finally drained. Tommy ended up collapsing in one of the mismatched chairs at the small table and watching in dead silence as Techno tried his best to

move all the dishes to the sink and attempted to wipe up some of the flour. More than once he found himself checking over his shoulder to make sure the kid was still awake only to find him staring blankly at the wall, idly picking at some of the fresh scabs on his face. Techno told him off whenever he caught him doing it but after the third time, it was like Tommy couldn't even hear him.

Techno sighed and glanced at the messy kitchen mournfully once more before making his way over to Tommy.

"Hey kid," he said gently, crouching down next to his chair but not daring to touch him. "Tommy, can you look at me for a second?"

Tommy stared forward blankly, his fingers picking at the edge of a scab under his eye enough that beads of red welled up in their wake.

"Hey," he tried again, "Tommy you're gonna hurt yourself, why don't you give me your hands?" he suggested, putting his hands out in front of him in an offer.

He was once again met with no response as Tommy blinked slowly at the wall.

Techno frowned. He knew that Tommy wasn't a stranger to dissociating, but even when he had done it with Puffy there he still seemed to automatically respond when addressed. This was...not exactly that. Though a full episode of sorts wasn't exactly out of the question for the kid that tried to shoot himself a couple hours before.

"Theseus, can you hear me?" He tried, putting a little more of an edge to his voice like he did in uniform. It probably wasn't the best idea but even a fear response to The Blade would have been less concerning than the empty look on his face.

Still, nothing. Techno sighed and moved to stand when Tommy suddenly flinched and whipped his head to glare at Techno.

"The fuck man, don't sneak up on me like that," he grumbled, looking more annoyed than anything else.

Techno blinked at him in confusion. "I was just talking to you trying to get your attention, you didn't hear me?"

Tommy frowned at him like *he* was the confused one in this situation. "Well yeah I heard you but I thought you were across the room just like, chattin' still, not right next to me whispering like a wrongin'."

Techno frowned, an uncomfortable thought starting to form in the back of his mind. "I wasn't whispering, Tommy. Is— how are your ears feeling? I saw one of them was bleeding a little bit earlier but I assumed the healing potion fixed it."

Tommy opened his mouth, wearing his *I'm about to start an argument* face, before abruptly freezing and shutting it again with an audible click. He tried twice more to say something before closing his mouth again and looking away.

“They were both ringing badly for a while but now it's only the left one.”

Techno glanced at the ear facing him as Tommy glared at the wall across from the table. He was not sitting on Tommy's left side. “And the right one?”

Tommy pressed his lips into a thin line that pulled at the split scab on the corner of his mouth. “The right one is *not* ringing.”

He was stalling, but Techno wasn't sure it was his place to call it out. “Can you hear anything out of the right one?”

On the table, Tommy's hands curled into fists so tight the skin of his knuckles turned white. “I don't think so,” he admitted after a tense moment. “But I guess that's what I get for firing a gun right next to my head instead of into it,” he chuckled weakly, though Techno didn't find it funny in the slightest.

It was more than a little messed up at this point. A suicide attempt gone wrong leading to a permanently debilitating injury? Absolutely tragic.

After Wilbur's attempt in high school, all of his lasting problems had been mental blocks, for the most part. Of course, the severe blood loss hadn't been great on his body but it wasn't like a career as a hero wouldn't do that for him anyway.

Hearing loss would be a lot harder to work through. On more than just a physical level too.

It wasn't fair, but few things in life seemed to be.

He waited a beat to see if Tommy had anything else to say before he sighed. “Okay. It's gonna be okay, Tommy, okay? Have the pain meds kicked in at all yet?”

He nodded mutely, hands twisting on the table as he pressed his thumb into the darkening bruises across his knuckles.

“Okay, then why don't I set your ribs, give you a little more healing potion, and then let you get some rest. That good with you?”

Tommy seemed to frown a little bit more as he turned to watch Techno from the corner of his eye. “What happened to not sleeping on the concussion?”

Techno held out his hand in a silent offer as he started to answer. “I didn't want to risk giving you any more healing potion but between the ribs being rebroken and the fact that your other ear is still ringing, I'm willing to risk it over other complications. The drawback is that it'll probably zap the rest of your energy but you need the rest anyway, so it's a win-win.”

Tommy eyed his outstretched hand before sighing and taking it with a small hum of agreement. Techno gently helped Tommy to his feet and slowly led them back toward the living room.

He left Tommy on the couch as he went to dig through the plastic storage bins for sheets and blankets. After making the bed as comfortable as possible, he managed to herd Tommy into

the room and explained how the whole rib thing was going to work.

Techno had only had to set someone's ribs like this twice in his life and once was on himself.

The first time had been one of his first missions through the nether with Skeppy and Bad. Skeppy had taken a tumble off a netherrack cliff and cracked his head and a few ribs on the way down and Bad had panicked and given him a healing potion before checking the rest of his injuries. As it turned out, his ribs had healed in a way that made it impossible for him to actually take a deep enough breath to really function in the nether's heat for long, so after some debate Techno had somehow ended up with the unpleasant job of rebreaking his friends' ribs. It had been fine in the end, of course, and eventually came in handy a few years later when his own advanced healing betrayed him in the middle of a huge battle and almost healed a rib in the perfect place to puncture his lung.

Setting Tommy's ribs was somehow even less pleasant than the first two times, however. There was something about the suffocating silence of the bedroom and the actual lack of danger or urgency that made the whole process slower and harder to listen to than the previous times. Guilt stabbed at his heart every time Tommy sobbed through the bunched up sweater sleeve between his teeth and his stomach flipped uncomfortably at the feeling of bones cracking and sliding beneath his hands.

By the time he was finished Tommy was fully crying but doing his best to suppress sobs, most likely because they would only make everything hurt worse. There were few things in Techno's life that could make him understand why people cried over things that had nothing to do with pain, but the roiling guilt in his gut and burn threatening the corner of his eyes was putting that record to the test.

He had to force himself to not run off under the excuse of getting the healing potion and sat with Tommy for a few minutes, combing his claw-tipped fingers gently through the boy's hair and trying his best to whisper quiet assurances that didn't sound incredibly pained.

He started slightly when Tommy abruptly sucked in a deep breath and spoke. "W-why are you doing this?" he whimpered, eyes still screwed tightly shut in a pained expression.

"Why— I just set your ribs so they can heal better Tommy," he said, brows furrowing. "Remember? The healing—"

"Not the fucking r-ribs Blade," he stuttered out. "A-all of it. Why are you helping me? You—you hated me for *years!* Why c-challenge Dream and give up the opportunity to turn me in? Why do you *care?*"

Techno was too stunned to answer for a moment. Though that turned out to be a mistake when the hazy look of desperation on Tommy's face briefly flashed to one of fear when it looked like techno was considering his answer.

"Tommy, I've *never* hated you," he breathed, half in shock at the implication.

"You tried to kill me the first time we met!"

“That was an accident!”

“How do you accidentally kick someone off a roof full force!”

“I thought you were one of the bank robbers Theseus! I don’t hate vigilantes that much, what the hell!”

“Then why the hell did you start calling me Theseus!”

“Because I cope through humour! I’m sorry that— wait,” he cut himself off, “did you actually think I was trying to kill you this whole time because of that?”

“Kinda!” Tommy exclaimed, throwing his hands up. “Yeah!”

Techno stared down at him as Tommy swiped aggressively at the tears still trying to track down his face. For some reason, he couldn’t help the way the corners of his mouth twitched into the ghost of a smile.

“It’s not funny dickhead,” Tommy muttered weakly as he gave up on trying to stop the tears.

“It’s a *little* funny,” Techno countered.

“It’s not! Fuck *off* you fucking bastard this isn’t making me believe you’re not just fucking with me.”

“I’m not fucking with you Tommy, I don’t hate you,” he said seriously, his smile dropping.

Tommy glared up at him but couldn’t quite hide the subtle frown on his face. “You promise?”

Techno sighed, slowly reaching up to brush back the sweat crusted curls from his forehead. “I *promise*. And besides, at the end of the day, Tommy will always be more important than Theseus, even if I did have a problem with him— which I *don’t* and never have, to be clear.”

Tommy huffed, the sound suspiciously close to a laugh. “Yeah right. Because Tommy’s just *so* important. At least people liked Theseus when he helped people.”

Techno has to bite the inside of his cheek to stop from reacting to Tommy’s words. Someday he was going to track down every person from Tommy’s past that made him feel like he wasn’t worthy of love and make them *bleed*—

Blood for the blood god

Blood

Retribution

Blood

Blood god

VENGEANCE

BLOOD

BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD

VENGEANCE FOR THE BATMAN

MILK FOR THE CORNFLAKES

BLOOD GOD

BLOOD GOD

—but now was not the time for that. Now was the time to prove to Tommy that he was cared for. That Techno or The Blade never hated him.

“You know, I liked Tommy just fine when I thought he was an annoying homeschool kid that tricked me into helping with homework then kicked my ass at Mario Kart an hour later,” he said honestly, continuing to comb his fingers through Tommy’s hair.

“Yeah but you didn’t actually care about me, you just didn’t dislike me.”

Gods Techno was not cut out for these emotional conversations without supervision. “Maybe, but my baseline for new people tends to be automatic distaste so you started out way ahead of the pack. Plus I don’t let people I don’t care about sit in my hospital bed with me when I’m injured, that’s like, way too much vulnerability for me. Not to even mention I let you read over my shoulder, I *hate* letting people look at my phone.”

“Yeah but I was sad,” Tommy argued immediately.

Techno sighed. “I still don’t accommodate for sad people unless I care about them or someone is lecturing me about being considerate. You may have noticed there was no one actively lecturing me at that moment.”

“But—“

“Tommy we could do this all night,” Techno said before he could get any further. “I care about you whether you like it, or believe it, I do. And shockingly enough I also cared about Theseus before I even realized you were one in the same, okay?”

Tommy scoffed, turning his head slightly as he reached to scrub at his eyes again. “Yeah, now I *know* you’re lying.”

“Tommy, do you know how the vigilante case assignments work?”

Tommy glared weakly at the wall as she shook his head.

“The hero commission basically has a bounty list, and heroes or agencies can claim an assignment for bringing in wanted persons by their own choice. Do you know how many vigilante cases the Dream Agency has taken since it was founded? How many vigilantes they’ve caught in the last four years?”

Tommy's eyes flicked back to him as he frowned. "How many?"

"Twelve. They've taken twelve cases and arrested nine of those people. The only ones they never arrested were Conner Eatspants, who was killed in combat, and Amnesia and Endwalker, who continued to evade capture for two years before vanishing into thin air a couple months ago," he explained. "Do you want to know how many vigilante cases I've taken on personally?"

Tommy hummed in agreement, a small look of confusion creasing his brows.

"Three. I took on the cases of Grimaldi, Eucalypta and Theseus. I've made zero arrests and can I take one more vigilante case before they bar me from accepting them due to low success rates."

Tommy's eyes widened a bit at that. "Seriously? But— what happened to those other vigilantes? I haven't heard anything about either of them in years."

"I convinced them to quit."

Wide blue eyes stared back at him blankly. "You're shitting me."

"Nope. Grimaldi, who I'd later come to know as my friend Squid, became a vigilante because it was a better source of income than straight up robbing innocent people. He'd target muggers and thieves so he could take their money and get them off the streets at the same time. All he really wanted, though, was enough money to get out of the city. So I befriended him and helped him get out. Last I checked he was a very successful farmer out in the county."

This now had Tommy's full attention as the tears finally started to ebb away. "What, just, simple as that?"

"Simple as that," Techno confirmed with a nod. "Eucalypta was a kid named Olive who just wanted to help people. I eventually convinced them there were better ways to do that with their skills and this year is their first year of law school if I remember correctly. But do you know what both of them had in common with Theseus and why I took all of those cases specifically?"

"They were both teenagers," Tommy supplied, sniffing as he took a deep, shuddering breath. "You... I think part of me knew all you ever wanted to do was talk to me but I was just so *scared*—"

"I know," Techno said when Tommy didn't finish the thought. "You and I had a much rockier first meeting than I ever did with Squid or Olive, but that's the way it goes sometimes and I just tried the best I could. But Tommy I never hated you, Theseus or no. You're an amazing, smart, talented, gifted kid who has gotten so much crap you didn't deserve in your life and I could never fault you for the path it's taken you on."

Tommy laughed weakly. "You can't just say shit like that man, you've only known me for a few months, prime I didn't know you were so sappy."

Techno briefly considered taking the out and dropping the topic, part of him wanted nothing more than to be done with emotions for the day. But Tommy needed to hear this.

“Tommy, you are a good person,” he said firmly, moving one hand to take Tommy’s in his own. “Not just the persona of Theseus, *you*. I’ve known you for years and you are a good person who has helped so many people and gotten nothing but misery in return and I’m sorry that you think that you don’t deserve good things. I’m sorry that I hurt you, and that I wasn’t there for you sooner.” The hand in his tightened painfully and he squeezed back gently. “And I know that right now everything is insane, and it doesn’t seem like there’s a good way out or happy ending for everyone, but I promise that there will be. You’re gonna be okay, alright? I’m gonna do everything in my power and more to make sure you come out on the other side of this with all of the love and care that you deserve— not what you think you deserve, but what you *truly* deserve. Okay?”

He watched Tommy’s eyes go glassy with tears again as he squeezed Techno’s hand impossibly tighter. “Please don’t make promises you can’t keep,” he nearly whispered, a single tear spilling over and down the half dried tear tracks from before.

“That is not a promise I ever intend to break, kid. You’re gonna be okay, I know you will.”

This time Tommy’s stifled sobs didn’t feel like knives digging into a wound, but something lighter. Something less broken. Something heartbreaking in a different way.

“You’re going to be okay, I promise.”

Phil couldn’t help but frown at the way Wilbur held himself as he exited the police station, heading towards Phil’s car.

Something was wrong.

It didn’t have anything to do with the way he was limping or the obvious exhaustion in the lines of his form, however. Phil knew to expect those, considering what Wilbur had told him and what he had heard from the news. But there was something off about him.

“We need to go,” Wilbur was already saying before the door shut behind him.

“Is everything—“

“*Now* dad. Every second we’re not getting further away from this precinct is another second closer to them realizing I just lied out of my fucking ass to every detective in the building. Now *go*.”

Phil did not have to be told twice. He didn’t even wait to see Wilbur buckle before putting the car into drive and taking off at a completely normal speed.

“What did you do?” He asked once they were out of sight of the police station and Wilbur sagged in his seat.

“I told them I had no idea why all those guys were attacking my apartment and that I was alone,” Wilbur sighed, burying his face in his hands. “All it's gonna take is one of the like forty guys they arrested to roll over to know that I just straight up lied and for them to come looking for me to find out *why*.”

Phil risked taking his eyes off the road to glance over his son one more time.

Wilbur looked exhausted in every sense of the word. He was a little more pale than usual with prominent dark circles clinging to his eyes. His knuckles were bruised and a couple of them had fresh scabs or scrapes that told of a hard fight. He had even covered up his hero uniform, wearing a basic pair of sweatpants and a police branded hoodie, and had a small drawstring bag at his feet, most likely with the rest of his gear in it.

There were plenty of questions to be asked here, but one was more important than the others.

“You said you saw Tommy, what does any of this have to do with him?”

Wilbur lifted his head slightly and glanced at Phil. “Everything. They were there for Tommy,” he rasped.

Phil’s grip on the steering wheel tightened until his knuckles went white. Of course. Of *course* Techno was right. Of course Phil couldn’t just have one semi-normal kid. Of course he always had to fail them when they needed him most.

He took a moment to collect his thoughts before speaking. Wilbur was obviously in a state of his own, so Phil didn’t want to push him too much. “Can you elaborate a little more, Wil? Why they’re after him, who *they* were, anything?”

Wilbur took an audibly shaking breath. “No,” he said. “Not— not here. Not yet. I just— I need to know he's alright. I sent him off on his own so I could distract the villains but he never sent me a message saying he got to the safehouse alright. And I saw Techno and told him so he knows Tommy’s alone but he ran off with Dream to look for George so I’m just really really worried that I just promised Tommy I’d protect him and then immediately got him *captured*—”

“Wil stop,” Phil interjected, “you’re just gonna stress yourself out mate.”

“Oh believe me we are *way* past the point of stress now,” he shot back with a strained laugh.

“I’m sure he’s fine. Which safehouse did you send him to?” he asked, hoping to redirect the conversation a little bit.

“The one in the lower district that you made Tech and I memorize when we were little. Or as I like to call it, the *everything is fucked beyond repair and we probably need to flee the city* safehouse.”

Phil pursed his lips but forced himself to keep his eyes on the road. “Are you sure it’s really that bad?”

“No,” Wilbur replied, making Phil’s grip relax ever so slightly. “I honestly think it might be worse than that, but I barely even know what the fuck is happening anymore so who knows.”

Phil slammed on the brakes a little too hard as the light at the next intersection flashed red. “Wil! You can’t just say shit like that!”

“I don’t know what else to say Phil! I probably just threw my entire career down the drain to protect that kid and once the cops figure out what's going on it's gonna land both of us in Pandora’s if they catch us again! It’s fucked! It’s cablooney! Show’s over and we can’t go home!”

“What the fuck are you even talking about? Why would they want to put Tommy in *Pandora’s* he's just a kid!”

“And so was I! But that didn’t stop them from fighting you tooth and nail about it when I started flunking school now did it?”

The light turned green but it took Phil a second to register it over his sudden shock. “Who told you that?”

“Techno, because you’re not subtle and he can be a snoop when he wants. And by the way, I still believe you should have told us yourself. How fucking devastating would it have been if the heroes just showed up one morning to escort me to Pandora’s and I had no idea, huh? What would we have done then?”

“I would have done exactly what we’re doing right now, *apparently*, ” Phil grumbled, hitting his turn signal. “Besides it doesn’t matter, everything worked out fine in the end, didn’t it? Whatever’s happening with Tommy, we can work it out.”

Wilbur laughed bitterly. “Yeah, because me trying to jump in front of a train while you were out of town was the perfect solution to prove my failings were mental health related and I should be given a second chance. I’m sure that method will work great for Tommy.”

The shocked silence that settled between them was like forgetting how to breathe.

“Shit, I—” Wilbur started with a panicked look before Phil cut him off.

“*Wilbur Soot-Watson!*”

“I didn’t mean that!”

“You better fucking not have why the hell would you even *imply* something like that?”

“Because I’m scared! I am fucking terrified that Tommy’s gonna become the next me because he’s on the perfect path to self destruction right now and I don’t know how to stop it! We fucked up by not telling him who we were sooner because he thought he was *alone*. He

was scared, and alone and thought he was a burden on us because we never wanted to take that leap first and now—”

“We’re here,” Phil finished, pulling into the entrance for an underground parking garage a few blocks from the actual apartment.

Wilbur cut himself off, digging the heels of his palms into his eyes as he took a deep, measured breath.

Phil pulled into a spot on the lowest level before shutting the car off and fully turning to look at Wilbur. Wilbur didn’t look up as he spoke.

“Look, I’m not going to press you for any information right now because I can tell there’s a lot going on here that I missed and you’re in no state to talk about it without a breakdown, but I just want you to know that I am *very* worried right now. I’m worried about what the hell Tommy’s been up to, and I’m worried about Techno working with Dream, but I’m also very worried about *you*. Are you okay Wilbur?”

Wilbur laughed at that, though it almost sounded like a sob. “No,” he croaked out. “I hurt Tech and went rogue to try and find Tommy myself. And when I couldn’t even do that right I started drinking, because I’m a fucking idiot alcoholic who would rather set my own life on fire than try and deal with a single negative emotion or poor choice in my life.” He looked up with tears shining in the corners of his eyes, not yet spilled over. “I didn’t even find Tommy in the end, he found me passed out on a train by sheer chance and got me home safe. I hurt Techno for nothing and probably hurt Tommy too because he had to deal with me being a fuck up—”

“*Hey,*” Phil cut him off with a hand on his shoulder. “We’ve talked about this, you don’t get to beat yourself up like that. You would never say that about anyone else relapsing so you don’t get to say it about yourself.”

Wilbur bit his lip and nodded mutely. His eyes squeezed shut with a small trail of tears tracing down his cheeks as his head hit the headrest.

Phil took a deep breath, trying to steady himself. He hadn’t really gone into that conversation expecting it to turn out like this, but he also couldn’t say he was surprised. Wilbur was in a bad way and if he knew anything about his son, it was that when it rains it pours. Wilbur never just let himself deal with one problem at a time, he always let his problems snowball until he hit a breaking point and everyone was left to pick up the pieces.

He just hoped Techno and Tommy weren’t at their breaking points too. He wasn’t sure how he could handle all three of his boys on his own.

Not for the first time the cold wedding ring resting against his chest burned like ice. What he wouldn’t give to have Kristin by his side to help scrape up their little, broken family.

“What if he’s not there, Phil?” Wilbur whispered, breaking the thin silence.

“I’m sure he will be,” he answered immediately. “It’s gonna be okay Wil. Tommy’s gonna be there, and he’s gonna be fine. And we’re gonna get Tech to come home, and we’re all gonna sit down and figure this out. Nobody’s going to Pandora’s, nobody’s getting kidnapped, and nobody’s going to die, okay? Everything’s gonna be fine, mate.”

Wilbur sniffed, raising a hand to swipe at the tears on his face. “You know, I promised Tommy everything would work out and you wanna know what he said?”

Phil frowned, unsure where this was going. “What?”

“He said *don’t make promises you can’t keep*,” Wilbur replied with a weak chuckle. The ghost of a smile vanished as soon as it came. “I really don’t want to break that promise.”

Phil ignored the way his eyes stung as he leaned over the centre console and dragged Wilbur into a hug. “You won’t,” he said firmly. “And if it makes you feel any better that kind of promise has a very vague timeline, so even if shit still hits the fan we have as much time to clean up as it takes.”

Wilbur twisted in his arms to return the embrace with a weak hum and Phil smiled.

They would work this out, that much he was sure of. But for now, they had to do what they could, and that meant getting to the safehouse and praying to the gods that Tommy was already there. If he wasn’t Phil had no doubt he and Wilbur were going to have a very long night.

It was almost amazing how Phil’s current anxieties kept him from freaking out too much as they walked the familiar route to his old apartment. To his previous life.

He hadn’t actually been back here since he was released from prison, a year after Kristin’s death. He had made it abundantly clear to every acquaintance and friend that he wanted nothing to do with his old life, even going as far as “selling” their old place without even going back to clean it up himself. So far as the rest of the world was concerned, you couldn’t pay Phil Watson to go within ten blocks of his old life and he did nothing to dispel that notion.

It worked wonders for buying out the apartment building under a shell corporation and getting contractors to buff the security of the entire complex with a few added bonuses on the actual safehouse unit. Was that very pro hero like behaviour? No, but Phil wasn’t in this game for reputations or laws. He was in it to keep him and his safe while protecting as many others as he could.

Still, he wasn’t expecting to walk into the old complex to find that barely anything had changed on the surface. And he certainly wasn’t prepared to finally reach the unit only to find that all of the original furniture and decor was still there.

But despite the discomfort he should have felt, it all vanished when a shadow moved in the darkness of the living room and it materialized into the shape of Techno, pointing a shimmering netherite sword their way.

“Tell me something only the real Wilbur and Phil would know,” he nearly snarled, his eyes flashing red in the dark as his powers flared.

Phil tensed, slowly pushing the door closed behind them when Wilbur stepped between his brother and Phil.

“I know when your real birthday is, and you’re three months younger than me,” Wilbur said in a rush.

Even though the hall light no longer illuminated the room he could see the way Techno’s shoulders dropped slightly as his eyes stopped glowing. And as nice as that was and everything, Phil’s brain was still a couple steps behind.

“What the fuck, nobody knows when his birthda— What the *hell* you two? How do you know? Wait, did you actually *find* his birth certificate?”

Techno’s shoulders fully relaxed as he dropped the sword with a fond huff. “Okay yeah, you’re Phil.”

“Techno that is *not* answering the question,” Phil scolded lightly. “Did you two actually find your birth certificate and not even tell anyone?”

“No, why are you talking about birth certificates, old man? I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah Phil,” Wilbur joined in with a weak laugh that sounded lighter than anything he had said all night, “what are you on about? Not going senile on us right now are you?”

“Yeah, it’d be a horrible time for it,” Techno sighed. The sounds of his socked feet on the dusty floors was followed by a lamp flicking to life, illuminating the room and Techno’s sorry state with it.

His nose was obviously broken, an angry bright red only starting to visibly bruise as the swelling went down. The entire length of his cheekbones and one of his temples also sported darkening bruises and he was favouring one leg as he slowly sank back onto the old couch.

“Oh shit, what the fuck?” Wilbur said, immediately rushing towards the couch. “Dude what —”

“Tommy’s asleep in the bedroom, go worry about him,” Techno cut in. The reaction was immediate as Wilbur’s eyes went wide and he pivoted, rushing towards the closed door and vanishing inside the dark room.

Phil felt something unwind in his chest as he made his way over to Techno’s side. All of them were here, and all of them were safe. That was leaps and bounds better than Phil had been hoping for after his conversation with Wilbur.

They could work this out. Everything was gonna be fine.

He picked up the blanket and pillow that seemed to have fallen to the floor, tossing the pillow on the other end of the couch and wrapping the blanket around Techno's shoulders. The fact that he fully leaned into Phil's touch instead of huffing and shrugging the affection off made Phil's heart ache.

"You alright, mate?" he asked quietly, slowly settling against Techno's side at the couch.

Techno leaned his weight against Phil's side, their shoulders pressed flush as he sagged slightly into the couch.

"Not really."

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked gently as he shifted his wings along the back of the couch, wrapped his arm around Techno's shoulder and squeezed him gently.

Techno leaned into the half hug and closed his eyes with a sigh. "I think it's a little late to get into all of that right now."

"Okay, well I'm here now if you need to talk," Phil said, tipping his head to bump against Techno's shoulder.

Techno hummed in agreement but made no move to open his eyes, instead leaning his weight fully against Phil as his own head tipped to rest on top of Phil's.

"Is Tommy alright?" He asked hopefully. He was asleep at least, so it could probably be worse

"*Definitely* not," Techno replied quickly. "He..." he trailed and sighed again without finishing the thought.

Phil frowned, half wishing he could read Techno's expression but not willing to move from their comfy position on each other. "Is he worse off than he was the first night we had him?"

Techno took a moment before answering. "No and yes," he said eventually. "His injuries aren't nearly as bad but— he's..."

This time when Techno didn't finish his thought Phil could feel something settle like a pit in his stomach. "Techno what's wrong with Tommy?"

Techno grumbled wordlessly as he pulled away from Phil's side and leaned forward so his elbows rested on his knees and his head hung low, eyes trained on the floor.

"He..." Techno trailed off again. After a moment of consideration, he just shook his head firmly. "We can have that conversation later. I...I don't think I can talk about it tonight."

Phil wrung his hands in his lap as he considered Techno for a moment. "You promise you'll actually tell me? You're not just gonna put this off forever and—"

"No," Techno cut in, his tone hard. "It's— it is important and you do need to know but I just think everyone could use half a night's rest before that conversation. I've had to deal with

more than enough *emotions* today and I definitely don't want to try and push that limit right now. We'll talk, just...give everyone a minute to settle in first."

Phil forced himself to swallow down the urge to push, to know, to *help*. Aside from the fact that it wouldn't be fair to press Techno when he let Wilbur tell him practically nothing, it also wouldn't help right now. Phil could wait another few hours in the dark if it meant that everyone was getting the time they needed to collect themselves. He didn't have to like it, but he at least had to try and hide it from them.

"Okay," he agreed with an air of ease and comfort he didn't necessarily feel. "Why don't you go back to sleep then? I'll make sure Wil's good to sleep in the room with Tommy and then I'll take the first watch."

Techno looked briefly confused before he seemed to realize. "Oh, right. Not enough space to sleep four."

Phil smiled weakly. "Never thought I'd need another space, but we'll make due. Get some rest Tech."

Phil stood, and darted quickly to peck a kiss against Techno's hair before he could complain as he usually would. He was surprisingly met with no more than a quiet hum of agreement when he pulled away. Techno said nothing else before flopping over on the pillow where it was and pulling the blanket tighter around himself.

He watched fondly for a moment before making his way to the bedroom door and pushing it open enough for more of the low lamp light to leak in.

Wilbur seemed to have made himself at home already. The pieces of his hero uniform and armour were scattered across the floor along with the police hoodie and sweatpants. At the foot of the bed sat two of the duffle bags Phil had packed and given to Clare to stash here a few years ago, the ones with red and blue tape meaning Wilbur and Techno had already found their emergency bags.

Wilbur was curled up in the bed already, facing Tommy's sleeping form with a pinched expression of worry. He was bundled up in one of the slightly oversized hoodies from Techno's bag, which looked well fitted compared to the pink one Tommy wore.

Tommy himself looked like shit. His face alone was paler and more bruised than Wilbur and Techno's put together. Many cuts of varying length and depth marred the skin of his face, looking very similar to the aggravated scars he had sported the day Phil met him. He remembered the medical reports Puffy showed him saying they had found plastic shrapnel in his face that they couldn't explain the origin of and couldn't help but wonder how he managed to do it again.

Wilbur's eyes glinted in the low light as they cracked open. "Did Tech tell you what happened to him?"

Phil shook his head. "No, I think we're all just going to talk in the morning. That way everyone can get some rest and we don't have to explain everything more than once."

Wilbur hummed quietly, though it wasn't a pleased sound. "I'm worried about him."

"Yeah," he agreed, though he wasn't entirely sure if Wilbur meant Techno or Tommy. "But everyone's safe right now and that's what matters. Try and get some sleep, I'll be in the kitchen if you need anything."

"Kay. Night dad," he nearly whispered, shifting to bury himself deeper in the blankets.

"Night Wil, I love you."

"Love you too."

Chapter End Notes

I just want them all to get hugs at this point they're so sad :(

Anyway follow me on [Twitter](#) if want updates about when I'm posting or whatever silly little thought I have at 2 am. Also join the [Discord Server](#) there's a lot of cool people over there that like to bully me in their spare time.

If you've made it this far please leave kudos and comment if you wish to shout at me or just keysmash into the void <3

Anyway, see you next time for the *actual* shake-up in pacing with a pov shift lmao

Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

After almost a week apart, Tommy and the Watsons finally share their secrets.

Chapter Notes

Whoops sorry about the long ass hiatus... my computer broke and it was all downhill from there.

Anyway, this is probably the 6th version of this chapter and I hope it's good but it's also almost 2 am so like idk what's happening anymore.

As always thank you to my wonderful beta and everyone that's been reading and leaving comments even while I was gone! I read them all and it warms my tired little heart every time.

Now here's the long awaited Talk™, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy woke in a panic.

He sat bolt upright, gasping for breath as he fought against the tangle of sheets and blankets around his legs. His mind only managed to register the blank walls of an unfamiliar room before the pain hit, knocking the air from his lungs and making his head pound.

A wave of nausea crashed into him and he screwed his eyes shut in an attempt to ward it off. Everything was *so much* and he didn't know where he was and he couldn't even remember why everything hurt—

“Toms?” A pinched voice cut through the cotton in his ears. “Tommy, can you look at me?”

Tommy immediately turned towards the sound of the voice and blinked against the dim light of the room until Wilbur came into focus beside him.

Wilbur hadn't been here when he fell asleep, right? Wilbur— the last time he saw Wilbur—

Holy shit. Wilbur was *alive*. Techno had told him but Tommy hadn't seen Wilbur since they split up when the apartment building was attacked the night before.

“*Wil,*” he gasped, half lunging for and half falling into his brother's arms with a choked sob.

“Hey, hey, hey, you’re okay man,” Wilbur whispered, arms wrapping him in an embrace without a moment's hesitation. “You’re okay, you’re safe. We’re okay. You’re okay.”

Tommy buried his face in Wilbur’s hoodie, unable to stop the burning tears in his eyes from silently spilling over as the events of last night started to come back to him.

Tommy was *not* okay. He was pretty sure he hadn’t been okay in a long, long time.

One of Wilbur’s hands moved from clutching his shoulder to cupping the back of his neck and Tommy felt an intense wave of nausea wash over him again. The phantom press of hands against his throat and fingers digging into his neck made his stomach churn horribly.

Oh gods he was gonna throw up.

He suddenly jerked away from Wilbur’s touch, planting his hands on the man’s chest and practically shoving him away as he stumbled to his feet. Wilbur said something that sounded concerned but Tommy didn’t quite hear it as he turned away.

He nearly tripped over his own feet as he followed his hazy memories of the apartment to the bathroom. In between one blink and the next he was on his knees, leaning over the toilet bowl and gasping for breath to try and calm his stomach.

Techno almost killed him last night.

Tommy almost killed himself.

He felt the weight of footsteps getting closer before he was able to register the sound. By the time he did, a flash of pink hair was already kneeling at his side.

“Hey kid, just breathe,” Techno encouraged softly, his deep voice somehow easier to hear under the rushing blood in Tommy’s ears. “Breathe, Tommy. Can you hear me?”

Tommy nodded without looking up, afraid of what might happen if he did.

“Okay, just keep breathing,” he said, relief audible. “You feel like you’re gonna throw up?”

Tommy’s throat burned with acid as he nodded. He was almost afraid that if he blinked, the stark white porcelain of the toilet would be replaced with dark pavement and blood.

Not that he wasn’t already remembering the night's events vividly. He almost felt like he couldn’t get away from the image of Clementine staring at him blankly as the rain fell right through her.

“Are you gonna throw up because of physical pain or ‘cause you’re freaking out?” Techno asked patiently.

If Tommy could do anything but sit frozen, he would have laughed in the man’s face. Bold of him to assume Tommy could even speak right now.

When Tommy made no move to answer, Techno started to repeat himself. “Tommy is it physical pain—“ his hand slowly reached towards Tommy and when it brushed his arm he flinched, batting the hand away and shoving himself away from the toilet.

Tommy’s back slammed into the wall hard enough to rattle his aching ribs but he barely noticed through the sheer panic that was drowning out all his thoughts.

Techno was frozen in place, his hand still hovering in the air as he stared at Tommy with what could only be a look of alarm. Wilbur hovered in the bathroom's doorway, looking stricken as he gripped the doorframe so hard his knuckles turned white.

“I— sorry,” Techno said quietly, something sad falling over his face. His hand dropped as he turned to look over his shoulder. “Phil! Has Tommy seen you in your uniform yet?”

“Not exactly?” Phil’s voice called back, barely audible even across the small apartment. “Why? What’s going on?”

Techno slowly pushed to his feet, not looking at Tommy as he moved to drag Wilbur away from the bathroom and back into the living area.

“Techno—“

“Give him some space Wil,” Techno interrupted as Phil took up Wilbur’s space in the doorway.

Tommy and Phil stared at each other for a moment before Phil smiled sadly.

“Hey mate, can I come in?” He asked, wings shifting slightly behind him.

Despite his racing heart, Tommy nodded immediately. He didn’t want to be alone right now, but he couldn’t help that Wilbur and Techno had both managed to make him freak out.

Phil inclined his head slightly as he tucked his wings against his back and slowly made his way into the room. It almost reminded Tommy of how one would approach a wild animal, but he couldn’t even be mad about it when the exaggerated movements calmed his nerves.

Phil settled on the floor across from him, wings awkwardly tucked between the sink cabinet and the toilet. He crossed his legs and rested his arms across his knees, palms up.

Tommy stared at Phil’s wings, unable to look him in the eye as they sat in silence.

The last thing Tommy had done before running away was call him *dad*. There was no way that was going to go unnoticed.

“I used to have nightmares bad enough to give me panic attacks in the morning too,” Phil said eventually, breaking the stretch of silence.

Tommy’s eyes flicked to his briefly and Phil smiled again.

“It gets easier,” he said quietly, and Tommy’s heart ached.

He wanted so badly for that to be true, but in the last few years, his life had done nothing but get harder. Maybe Phil understood that in a way Tommy hadn't thought he could before, but maybe he didn't. Heroes were so different from vigilantes at the end of the day.

But they were also just people in the end. He was still Phil just like Tommy was still Tommy.

"Nothing about this is easy," he croaked, eyes drifting to fix on a non-existent point on the wall behind Phil.

Phil chuckled weakly, sounding almost as tired as Tommy felt. That was enough to draw Tommy's attention back to him and he felt a stab of guilt at what he found. The bags under Phil's eyes were so heavy they seemed to weigh his whole being down, making him look a lot older than he should. He was a little paler than usual too, making the half-faded bruise on his jaw stand out.

"I can imagine," Phil said, his sad smile still in place. "And look mate, I'm going to be completely honest with you when I say I have no fucking clue what's going on with you. I sure as hell don't know what's up with Wilbur and I barely even understand what Techno's been up to and he's the one that's actually been *talking* to me this week. And it fucking sucks cause you three are my boys and all I want to do is help. Will you let me help you?"

If Tommy wasn't already dehydrated from bawling his eyes out the night before, he probably would have burst into tears right then. As it was, his eyes stung and his throat closed up when he tried to open his mouth to answer.

Phil sat patiently as Tommy gathered himself enough to force out a shaky answer.

"I'm not sure anyone can help at this point." After a beat, he laughed weakly. "But I'm so fucking scared Phil, I've never had this much to lose before."

The look that Phil gave him, Tommy couldn't even begin to understand. It wasn't that he didn't recognize the emotions, or that he hadn't seen people wear similar expressions before, it was because no one had ever looked at *him* that way.

Phil was looking at Tommy like he was something precious, something he valued and cared for, like someone he *loved*. He had seen Eryn's dad give him that look when they were kids, and had seen the same kind of desperation in Beau's father's face as they fled to safety. It was the look a father gave a child he loved and it had the deep hurt and sympathy only a father could feel on a child's behalf.

"I'm not gonna let them take anything else from you Tommy, I—"

"*Don't*," Tommy cut him off as his heart leapt into his throat. "Don't you dare make me any promises right now. Just—" he stopped, biting his lip as his gaze fell to the floor.

The dull ache in his ribs paled in comparison to the black hole of hurt in his chest. Every beat of his heart only seemed to make gravity pull harder at his core, the weight of it almost trying to drag him through the tiled floors into oblivion.

The feeling of weight shifting on the floor nearby brought his attention back up to the man still sharing the cramped space.

“You’re right, I shouldn’t promise anything like that yet,” Phil said quietly, his hands curling into fists where they rested in his lap. Something in his demeanour shifted as his gaze drifted to the ceiling. “But if there is one thing I can promise, it’s that whoever is doing this to you is going to rot in the deepest pits of hell when I’m done with them.” His eyes found Tommy’s again, burning with a kind of fire Tommy had never seen in him before. “That I can guarantee.”

Tommy ignored the part of himself that immediately argued that Phil couldn’t do that if he *died*.

This wasn’t Phil making the promise to him, it was Tempest himself.

The reminder made Tommy’s stomach twist so suddenly that he almost leaned over the toilet again. Phil was fucking Tempest. Just like Wilbur was Whisper and Techno was The Blade. And Tommy was Theseus.

Phil didn’t even know yet. There was no way he could, not with how much love and kindness he was still showing Tommy. Tempest had been the number one ranked hero in the city for years, there was no way he would be as lenient on vigilantes as Techno. Hell, the only reason Techno was okay with it was because he knew Theseus for so long, because he felt guilty about his assumed death.

Phil and Wilbur wouldn’t take it the same. All heroes hated vigilantes, no exceptions.

Well, aside from Captain Sparklez. And Guardian. And maybe Starr-Strike. And from what he had heard Vex-Wing and—

Wait. That was actually a lot of exceptions.

“Tommy,” Phil said after a few seconds of silence. Tommy looked up, trying to shake the thought from his head.

“Yeah?”

“Can I hug you?” he asked, shifting so that he was on his knees, arms and wings slightly open in a clear invitation.

Tommy was already being wrapped up by strong arms before he even realized he had moved from the other side of the room. Phil’s huge wings slowly shifted, wrapping around their bodies like a shield from the world.

He buried his face in Phil’s shoulder, eyes scrunched shut in the hope of holding what little tears he had left at bay.

He really, *really* fucking hoped that Tempest and Whisper would be exceptions too.

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t there for you mate,” Phil said, voice bare above a whisper. “I should have done better for you. I’m sorry.”

Tommy managed a stuttering breath as his arms slowly snaked around him to return the hug. “S not your fault,” he muttered, pressing his forehead against Phil’s collarbone. “I wouldn’t have let you in anyway. I thought I was on my own.”

Phil hummed and Tommy relaxed further as he felt the sound reverberate against him. “And now? Do you still think you have to do it alone?”

In a perfect world, the answer to that question was yes. Tommy would love to think he could go it alone and be right about it. But after last night he knew it would never be possible. How the hell could Tommy be expected to protect his loved ones alone when given the choice he’d rather shoot himself than the guy threatening to hurt them?

“No,” he whispered, shaking his head against the shoulder as he spoke. “I know I can’t.”

Tommy could feel the way Phil relaxed slightly at the admission, his shoulders dropping slightly. “Good,” he replied. Tommy almost grimaced as he realized Phil would not have that same reaction if he knew the reason *why* Tommy said that.

They sat in silence for a while, neither of them in any rush to break the embrace as Tommy went practically boneless in Phil’s lap. He had no idea if it was a conscious choice but after a minute Phil began to gently rock him from side to side, still locked in his arms. Tommy melted into his side, soaking up the affection for as long as he could.

From the bathroom, Tommy could occasionally hear the clanging of cookware and the deeper timbre of Wilbur and Techno speaking in low tones in the kitchen. For a brief moment, he was confused about the lack of audible footsteps to go along with it. It was only once he felt the way the floor creaked with the rhythm of someone walking that he realized his right ear was the one facing the door.

If at all possible, he tried to melt further into Phil’s arms to avoid that line of thinking.

Phil chuckled quietly. “We should probably move out to the couch before you fall asleep kiddo,” he huffed, already shifting Tommy in his arms.

“M not a kid,” Tommy argued on reflex.

“Uh-huh,” Phil huffed. He moved as though to stand and Tommy stubbornly rag-dolled, making the avian grunt, the sudden weight forcing him back down. He laughed and Tommy couldn’t help but smile. “You know this isn’t helping your case for not being a child, right?”

“I dunno what you’re talking about,” he said as he snuggled into place again.

“Okay, well if you’re gonna trap me here, then I’m gonna start pestering you with questions to stop you from falling asleep.”

Tommy scoffed. “Wow, have you ever heard of this thing called fun? You should try it sometime.”

“Is there a short version you can give me about why you ran away?” Phil said abruptly, making the ache in Tommy’s chest spark back to life.

Well, he did admit that he couldn't do it alone anymore right? Besides, not like he didn't already tell Wilbur the important bits.

“I have a power that lets me turn other people's powers off at will,” he sighed, turning his head to the side so his bad ear rested against Phil’s chest. “The villain Schlatt knows about it and has been sending people to kidnap me since the night— the night I ended up in the hospital. One of the mercenaries was the person that put Wil's car in the river because of me so I ran to protect you guys.”

A beat of silence.

“Holy *shit*. ”

“Yeah.”

“Wow. I— okay then.”

Silence fell once again and Tommy sighed before forcing himself to sit up and ease out of the hug. Phil seemed hesitant to let go but relented sooner than Tommy would have liked, respectfully pulling back into his own space. Tommy resisted the urge to shiver in the sudden absence of Phil’s warmth.

“Okay?” Tommy repeated hesitantly, pulling his knees to his chest and ignoring the small flares of pain that protested the movement.

“Yeah,” Phil said, meeting his eyes with another tired smile. “That’s a lot, but I think we can work it out. At the very least we know where Schlatt is and why he wants you, so it's not like we’re fighting a shadow.”

Tommy frowned. “We... *know* where Schlatt is?”

“Well, it's complicated, but yes,” Phil replied, finally pushing to his feet with a grunt. “That’s probably a conversation to have with your brothers though. So let's get some breakfast in you and then—” he sighed, holding out a hand to Tommy “—talk it out, I suppose.”

They let Tommy sleep after the Talk.

But for some reason, as emotionally and physically exhausted as the nearly three hours of heart-to-heart conversations had left him, sleep was nowhere to be found.

It wasn't a huge surprise to Tommy. They had gone through it all. Every single major event from between the night Theseus “died” up until the fights from the night before. Every time Tommy tried to dance around a truth or information Techno or Wilbur already knew, they called him out on it until everything was laid on the table for all to see.

Despite the ever present ache in Tommy's muscles and bones calling him to rest, his mind raced. He couldn't stop himself from thinking over the more intense parts of the conversation. His mind was clogged and twisted with words and new knowledge to the point where he felt like he was nearly drowning.

Through the cracked bedroom door he could hear the others quietly going about the rest of their day. With his right ear pressed into the pillows it was easier to follow the sound of Techno's footsteps across the kitchen as he cleaned up breakfast. Wilbur and Phil were closer, Wilbur pacing back and forth in front of the couch as they discussed something in low tones.

Tommy didn't have the energy to pay attention to their words as the conversation from earlier looped like a broken record in his mind.

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"Enough!" Phil nearly shouted, slamming his hands down on the table.

Tommy couldn't stop himself from flinching, sending sparks of pain through his ribs and making him wince. All eyes turned to him with varying looks of concern, arguments seemingly forgotten.

Phil opened his mouth to say something but Tommy beat him to it. "Fuck off, I'm fine," he grumbled, settling back in his chair and turning his glare onto his empty plate.

The avian sighed, hands sliding across the table and folding into each other with laced fingers.

"This isn't up for debate. Both of you promised me that we would talk about this in the morning and all things considered, I think we'd do well to just get everything out on the table right now. There are a lot of moving parts here that I don't fully understand and I'd be willing to bet that none of you really get it either. So why don't we just put aside whatever differences we're having right now and talk this through from the beginning, sound good to everyone?"

Tommy could feel eyes on him in the silence that followed, but he made no move to address it. He had no idea what the hell Techno and Wilbur were fighting about and he had no real desire to keep jabbing at Techno himself. He glared harder at his plate.

"Fine by me," Techno huffed, pushing back his chair with a scraping squeak of wood across the tiles. Tommy still didn't look up as the man stood, the sound of his footsteps heading in the direction of the living room.

"Wil?" Phil asked, still using his scolding dad tone.

"You're gonna be really pissed at me," Wilbur mumbled, his fingers drumming against the table nervously.

"I really doubt that Wilbur, I'm just worried about you boys, okay?" Phil reassured. "I'm sorry for snapping like that."

“Don’t be,” Wilbur sighed, pushing back his own chair with a little less vigour. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Wilbur’s hand reached out, ruffling Tommy’s hair gently as he passed on his way out of the kitchenette towards the living room.

Tommy didn’t look up, still glaring at the table. There was a long second of silence before Phil spoke again.

“Tommy?” he asked gently. “You alright mate?”

“I really don’t want to talk about any of it,” he admitted quietly. He chewed on his lip for a moment. “I’m— you’re all gonna keep looking at me with that fucking pity and I *hate* it. I made it this far on my own and I don’t need you all to treat me like I’m made of glass, okay?”

A few beats of silence passed before he heard Phil shift and one of his hands appeared in Tommy’s line of view, palm open in an invitation. Despite himself, Tommy barely hesitated before reaching out to take it, his hand squeezing Phil’s lightly.

“Tommy, can you look at me?” he asked, gently squeezing Tommy’s hand back.

Tommy bit his lip again before gritting his teeth and looking up.

His eyes were sad but he smiled when Tommy met his gaze. “Nobody thinks you’re made of glass Tommy, I can guarantee that.”

“Then why the fuck do you all keep *looking* at me like that?” Tommy spit back.

Phil’s smile faltered and shifted into something a little more serious. “We’re *concerned* about you Tommy. It’s not pity, we don’t feel bad for you we just— we’re sympathetic to whatever pain you’re in and we want to help you. You’re not some kicked puppy from the side of the road, you’re family. We’re just worried.”

Tommy’s eyes stung but he found a bitter laugh escaping his chest. “Phil I’m a fucking foster kid, that’s like the definition of a kicked puppy you found on the street.” He laughed again, harder this time as something occurred to him. “Wilbur literally found me in an *alley* for prime’s sake.”

Though he seemed to fight it for a second Phil eventually chuckled. “Okay, well that may be the case, but I also found Techno in a basement so that just seems to run in the family I guess.”

Tommy gave a little watery laugh at that, trying his best not to let any tears spill over. He was just so tired of crying.

“C’mon, the sooner we sort all this out the sooner I can run out and get ice cream or something,” Phil said gently. “I’ve got my computer too so we can watch Up or something else feel-good after too, ‘kay?”

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“Phil,” Techno raised his voice over the sound of the conversation in the living room.

Tommy sighed quietly, rolling slowly from his side to his back to alleviate the ache starting to form in his shoulder.

Part of him wished they would let him close the door all the way so he might actually have a chance at sleep. But he also knew why they had insisted on leaving it cracked open. He had been in the foster system long enough to know what suicide watch looked like, he knew the drill here.

“Yeah mate?” Phil replied, cutting Wilbur’s ranting off.

“Any chance you could do the grocery run? If we’re holding up here for a while I think we’re gonna get tired of focaccia bread pretty quickly,” Techno said with a hint of humour.

“I think you’re seriously underestimating my love of focaccia Techno,” Wilbur shot back as Phil chuckled.

Techno snorted. “Well as much as you and Tommy would love to argue that, *I* want something that actually has substance to it.”

Phil laughed again. “Don’t worry mate, I’ll go get some stuff. And speaking of Tommy, any snacks you guys know he would want?”

“I don’t know about what he likes but get some apple juice, he lost a decent amount of blood so he could use the sugar and vitamin boost.”

Tommy’s stomach twisted at the thought of food right now. He still felt nauseous after everything he had spoken about and learned not even a few hours before.

--

“That’s not where this starts,” Techno rumbled. He drew his knees up and rested his arms on them, fingers laced together. He looked at Tommy. “Why don’t you tell us what really happened that night?”

He wasn’t glaring at Tommy, though he almost wished he would. He couldn’t say that he wanted Techno to hate him, but it would almost make this easier to convince himself he was actually mad at the man.

Tommy sighed. “I don’t want to tell them,” he argued weakly, though it was barely an objection.

“How about you just tell it your way,” he said slowly, “or I’ll tell it mine.”

Tommy glared at him like he was trying to explode him with non-existent laser vision. Techno just looked back with an impassive and immovable steadiness.

Wilbur cleared his throat awkwardly as he leaned further into the couch. Tommy broke eye contact first to pout in Wilbur's direction as he spoke.

"I'm gonna be honest, I think I'm missing something here," Wilbur said with a nervous laugh. He looked at Tommy, eyes searching. "What's he talking about?"

Tommy shot one more withering look Techno's way before sitting back on the couch with a huff. "The night you found me started when I snuck out for a vigilante patrol and ran into The Blade and Scarlet Thorn," he began.

He started out slowly, trying to calm his nerves as he went back through the details of the night. He mentioned how the heroes broke his communicator but not before he sent a distress signal. He explained how he used his powers to get past Scarlet and that Endwalker took him and Amnesia back to Haywire at the base.

Tommy told them about how he left his communicator when he took the mission from Haywire. He did not go into the details of the fight at the docks.

"Both the groups brought back up," he explained. "I was caught in the middle when the fighting started and almost didn't make it out. I was injured but I made it back to my foster parents' apartment in one piece."

He opened his mouth like he was going to continue but no word came with it. After a beat he risked raising his head, trying to gauge Phil and Wilbur's reactions so far.

Phil was pale, his wings drawn as close against his back as the rickety chair would allow. His elbow's rested on his knees and he had one hand clamped over his mouth. When Tommy's blue eyes met his own, some of the tension seemed to drain from his body and the hand over his mouth dropped. The smile underneath was far more uneasy than reassuring.

"You're *Theseus*," Wilbur nearly whispered, drawing Tommy's attention to him.

Wilbur was also pale, a much more obvious expression of horror taking over his features as he turned to Tommy.

"You're quick on the uptake, eh?" Tommy half-joked, lips twitching in the ghost of a smile.

"Tommy you almost—" his voice cracked, cutting him off.

"Almost got shot in the face? Yeah I'm pretty aware of that." He saw Techno tense in the corner of his eye but ignored it.

Wilbur audibly swallowed and blinked back tears with a nod. It took a moment for him to speak again. "If you lied about your foster parents attacking you, then why did they pull a gun on me at the hospital?"

Tommy didn't even try to stop the hoarse laugh that slipped past his lips. "Because I didn't *lie*," he replied with a cracked grin. "I was back in the apartment for all of ten minutes trying

to treat my wounds when Laura Blackwell opened the bathroom door and held me at gunpoint. Nothing I told you in the hospital was a lie except where I was and what I did before they attacked me.”

He wasn’t exactly surprised when Wilbur all but tackled him with a hug. Tommy grunted as shocks of pain raced through him but relaxed into the hug, gripping Wilbur back just as tight.

“Holy *fuck* Tommy,” Wilbur nearly gasped, squeezing him just a little tighter.

“I was fine though,” he muttered. It was mostly true, he had taken it in stride and moved on to his new life with the Watsons.

“You shouldn’t have had to be,” Wilbur mumbled. “Nobody should have to be that strong for themselves.”

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The sound of the apartment door closing was followed by a series of at least four locks sliding or clicking into place. Tommy heard someone sigh quietly followed by the sound of something quietly thumping against a wall.

After a few seconds of near silence, the sound of footsteps headed towards the kitchen where someone else was repeatedly opening and closing cabinets. If Tommy had to guess he might say Techno was reorganizing the kitchen, he couldn’t imagine why else there would be so much movement after the dishes were long done.

“How are you holding up?” Wilbur asked, almost too quiet for Tommy to hear.

The sound of Techno moving paused. “What do you mean?”

Wilbur sighed. “Well, aside from the fact that you got hit with a drug that permanently changed your powers and physiology *and* gave you weird magic voices? Tommy tried to kill himself and you were the one that stopped him. I just... can’t help but draw comparisons. Just wondering if you were too, I guess.”

“Of course, I’m drawing comparisons,” Techno snapped. “Pretty damn hard not to when I seem to be the common denominator in those situations.”

“Woah, hey, that’s not what I meant at all Tech,” Wilbur said quickly, the pitch of his voice rising in concern.

“Then what did you mean by it Wil, 'cause I’m really not seeing a lot of other similarities there.”

A beat of silence.

“I mean— look I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, Tommy is *not* me. He’s got a hell of a lot more going on in his life than I ever did at that age, so if anything his reaction is a lot more justified than mine. I’m just a fuck up, but we knew that. What I *meant* is that this is

probably rehashing some old wounds, which it seems to be, and that there's no shame in talking about it if you need to, okay?"

Tommy stared at the ceiling. It almost felt like he could feel the lining of his lungs stinging as he took shallow breaths.

This family deserved so much better than all the shit Tommy was dragging them through, but it was pretty clear that there was no untangling them from this mess. Still, it made his heart somehow even heavier with guilt to know that on top of fucking up Techno personally, he was rehashing whatever the heck happened with Wilbur's attempt.

This time it was Techno's turn to sigh. "You're not a fuck up, Wilbur."

"Ehhhh, that's debatable honestly," Wilbur argued.

"Comparing your trauma to Tommy's and going '*well it wasn't that bad*' is a crappy mindset dude. It's like saying 'oh even though I was never injured before and got shot in the chest I'm not as bad off as the guy who's been shot five times before and just got run over by a car' you know?"

"No," Wilbur said after a second, "I have no fucking clue what you just said that was a shit metaphor."

Techno groaned. "I don't know man, have you ever seen that drawing on Pinterest of the old messed up wolf with like twenty arrows in its back standing next to the wolf pup with only one arrow?"

"No? What the hell do you use Pinterest for?"

"Shut up, can you at least picture that?"

Wilbur snorted. "Yeah, sure."

"Well, it doesn't matter that the pup only got shot once, both of them are bleeding out. My point being is that it doesn't matter that on paper Tommy's been through more, you still metaphorically got shot. You can't just compare traumatic experiences like that, it's not math, it's people and experiences and feeling, you know?"

Wilbur hummed thoughtfully. "Right, so what you're saying is that I'm metaphorically a puppy," Wilbur said, a grin obvious in his voice.

Techno gave a long-suffering sigh. "What I'm saying is that we should both go back to therapy after this has all blown over. Tommy too, obviously."

"Yeah," Wilbur agreed wearily. "Therapy doesn't sound like a horrible idea. At the very least it's kinda nice to not have to bear it all alone."

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"Ranboo got *shot*!?" Tommy nearly shouted, his heart leaping into his throat.

It was terrifying enough to hear about his friend getting kidnapped in the middle of the night by a bunch of mind-controlled heroes, but going to the nether and getting *shot*? Ranboo wasn't a solo fighter, he was the getaway guy. He could have *died* right before Tommy ran away and he never would have known.

Techno grimaced, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. "Yeah, twice actually, but he took it like a champ. I never would have guessed that awkward—"

"What do you mean *twice*?! What the fuck!"

"It— No, okay just—"

"Techno!"

"He's fine!" Techno tried. "Okay? When we got separated in the nether I was injured so he was protecting me even though he didn't have any armour or weapons. He took a crossbow bolt to the stomach, beat up a few more guys, got slashed with a sword and punched, and then I *may* or may not have killed the cultists with my powers to save him. It took a bit but he got us back to The Captain and she healed both of us good as new. Ranboo's fine though, promise."

Tommy's chest hurt as memories of Ranboo with far less severe injuries than *getting shot* raced through his mind. Ranboo... okay maybe Ranboo was good at toughing the pain out but still. Tommy had only been shot clean through with bullets a few times and it hurt like the pits of hell, he couldn't even imagine what an arrow getting stuck in your stomach would feel like to keep fighting with.

Then he realized—

"You said he got shot *twice*," Tommy said, balling his fists to hide the way they were starting to shake. "Unless I'm counting wrong, you still haven't told us the second one."

Techno was silent for a moment, his jaw visibly flexing as he clenched his teeth. "Well, I wasn't exactly there the second time, he just came to me right afterwards."

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Half of the muscles in Tommy's body felt like they were trying to tear away from his bones with how badly they ached. Every breath made him hyper-aware of where the muscles along his spine stretched, connecting to bones and other muscles that all held him in one piece.

There really was nothing like injuries to make someone fully aware of the fact that they were a living creature with a body where everything was connected. He *hated* it.

He could hear Phil and Techno chatting in the kitchen as Tommy assumed they were putting away groceries. The thin crack of light shining on the ceiling of the darkened bedroom widened as the door was slowly pushed open.

"Toms?" Wilbur asked, his voice low and hard to catch if Tommy hadn't been paying attention. "You still asleep?"

Tommy's tongue felt too heavy in his mouth to form an answer, so instead of fighting it he just shifted until he could see Wilbur's face peeking through the doorway.

Wilbur smiled softly. "Hey, there he is. Did you manage to get any rest?" he asked, stepping through the door further into the room.

Tommy shook his head slightly. He was pretty sure he didn't get much more than a few minutes of accidental sleep between tossing and turning.

Wilbur nodded as he slowly started to make his way toward the bed. One of his hands was carefully hidden behind his back in an incredibly suspicious way while the other had—

He had Tommy's backpack. Not the ratty old one Whisper had brought Tommy at the hospital, but the brand new one Wilbur had given him a couple weeks into his stay with them. At the time Wilbur had claimed it was because he saw Tommy's old one and decided he needed a better one to hide his new laptop in, just in case.

It was strange to realize that both those interactions had been with the same person, but at the same time, it made sense. Wilbur just seemed to have a thing about making sure Tommy had the things that were important to him. It was probably some carryover from being a foster kid himself, but it still made some of the pain in Tommy's chest ease.

If anything Wilbur may be the only one still treating Tommy the same as before.

"Phil snuck back into the house to grab some things and got you some clothes and stuff," Wilbur explained as he set the bag down next to the bed.

Tommy, who still hadn't sat up because he knew it was gonna hurt like a bitch, gave Wilbur's hidden hand a very pointed look.

Wilbur caught his expression and grinned. "I asked him to grab you—" he jerked his hand around revealing the hidden item in his palm "—this!"

Tommy sat up so fast it made his muscles scream and his head swim but he hardly cared as he practically snatched the stuffed cow from his hands. Wilbur, on the other hand, seemed to care very much about the pained wince Tommy let out as one hand dropped to cradle his injured ribs.

"Hey, hey, hey, take it easy he's not going anywhere," Wilbur assured softly, one of his hands coming to rest between Tommy's shoulder blades. "I just figured if you were gonna be sitting around you might start missing him," he said with a smug face that made Tommy want to punch him.

But punching him sounded like way too much work when he could just lie back down again.

Wilbur looked concerned but didn't comment as Tommy slowly lowered himself back into the blankets, grimacing as the movement pulled at his strained muscles. The second Tommy's head hit the pillow his eyes slipped shut with a deep sigh.

He was so fucking tired.

“Not in much of a bantering mood I see,” he sighed, taking a seat on the edge of the bed. “You feel like you’re gonna be able to sleep any time soon? If not then my next suggestion may be a shower.” One of his hands gently brushed at the hair covering Tommy’s face, making him open his eyes again. “You quite literally still have mud in your hair.”

Tommy gave him a weak glare and grunted, making Wilbur laugh.

“C’mon, the hot water will probably help with some of the achiness too. And Dad got groceries so you can pester Tech into making whatever food your little heart desires.”

Tommy’s little heart didn’t desire much right now, *especially* not food. But he knew they weren’t gonna let that slide, all things considered. He let out a short huff and nodded weakly. It wasn’t like he had anything better to do right now anyway.

Wilbur smiled and looked so proud in that moment that Tommy had to look away. He didn’t deserve pride for being a barely functioning person right now. But at the very least it wasn’t pity.

It ended up being a whole *thing* to actually get him into the shower. For as much as the healing potion Techno had given him the night before had helped, it had barely healed most of his external injuries. And if there were two things that didn’t get along it was fresh stitches and hot water.

In the end, he had to submit himself to the mortifying ordeal of sitting on the toilet lid in his boxers while Techno plastic wrapped and taped up his thigh so the stitches from the trident injury wouldn’t get wet. Wilbur had the much easier job of using actual medical-grade plastic patches to cover the few other areas with a few stitches in the deepest cuts.

Eventually, he was deemed thoroughly wrapped enough and given the gruff order to “keep it short” by Techno as the brothers exited the bathroom. It didn’t escape Tommy’s notice how Wilbur didn’t fully latch the door behind him.

He had the feeling was going to get real fucking tired of suicide watch very quickly. But that was a problem for future Tommy.

The shower was nice at least. He hadn’t really had the chance to shower any longer than three minutes in the last week or so and he definitely hadn’t had access to hot water. His biggest issue was that he couldn’t soak everything under the hot stream of water at once, meaning that no amount of shifting and turning on unsteady legs could ever truly wash away the tension in his muscles.

But it was nice. It was the warmest he had felt in days and washing away all the grime from his skin almost felt like a new beginning. The hot water even managed to scrub away the permanent feeling of tear tracks on his cheeks that had been plaguing him for the last couple days.

But if there was one thing the water truly failed at, it was quieting his mind. There was always something about the white noise of rushing water that amplified the speed of the thoughts in his head.

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“Tommy...” Phil tried, only to trail off again.

Tommy bit the inside of his cheek, his eyelids fluttering as he tried in vain to will away the tears in his eyes.

“You’re—” he gasped for a breath, not quite a sob but almost. “You’re sure it was her?”

Phil’s lips went pale as he pursed them, his brows drawn together in a pained expression. “I... based on what Techno just told us, yes. I’m so sorry, Tommy.”

He bit down hard enough to taste iron as his teeth pierced the soft flesh of his cheek. It was enough to keep himself from laughing though, so he hardly noticed. He had noticed how on edge it seemed to put Techno when he laughed instead of crying, but his body just couldn’t seem to pick an emotion.

It wasn’t funny, he definitely didn’t think it was. But it was just—

Crumb was dead.

Crumb was dead and she died trying to save Tubbo and Ranboo was there for it and Phil saw her body and—

It was funny. This entire time Tommy had been *so* worried about people getting killed over this, but it never ever occurred to him that they might already be dead. That nothing he did could change the fact that people were dead and *more people could die*.

He took a shuddering breath. He wasn’t going to break down yet, so he wasn’t going to laugh and he wasn’t going to really let himself cry. The hard part of this conversation was yet to come and the last thing Tommy wanted to do was give them an excuse to put him through this twice. They were going to finish this conversation in one sitting no matter what, because Tommy wasn’t going to be able to talk for fucking *days* after this.

“Was it quick?” he asked. His hands curled into fists so tight he could feel his nails threatening to pierce the skin.

Everything hurt down to his damn teeth, but he couldn’t break yet. The only thing that could stop him from just getting through this was if he passed out.

He ignored how that was a very real possibility as his breathing refused to even out and black spots gathered at the edges of his vision.

Phil had so many emotions on his face that Tommy couldn’t be bothered to try and identify them all. But he would almost say that he looked more sympathetic than anything else when he finally answered.

“Yeah,” he said simply. “She was already gone by the time I got to her. If she was even still alive when she got to the hospital, then she got to spend her last few moments in a friend’s

arms.” He looked down at the floor, wings drawing impossibly closer against his back. “That’s all you can ask for, sometimes.”

Tommy felt like he was going to be sick.

But they had to keep going.

--

It was *not* Tommy’s fault that he got tired of standing and then accidentally fell asleep in the shower. It was everyone else’s fault for not realizing how likely that outcome was. And while he was glad that when they did manage to wake him up the water had been turned off and a towel was thrown over him, he was still perfectly justified in being grumpy about it.

Somehow Phil and Techno were fussing over him so much that fucking *Wilbur* ended up being the voice of reason that kicked them out and helped Tommy finish cleaning his stitches. It was weird how Wilbur went from being the overbearing one to the only sane person when it came to Tommy’s injuries.

Though it probably shouldn’t have been that strange to him. Wilbur was the only one who fully understood what it was like on this side of the whole attempting to off yourself thing, so of course he was better at knowing how Tommy wanted to be treated.

Wilbur was also the one that defended Tommy’s choice to bundle with half the apartment’s blankets on the couch. Phil and Techno both tried to argue that Tommy should go back to bed and get some real sleep but one look at Wilbur seemed to be all the convincing the man needed to take Tommy’s side.

Not that Techno was particularly mad about that decision right now.

Tommy was actively using the piglin-hybrid’s lap as part of his pillow nest and Techno seemed to be in no hurry to escape it. If anything he seemed calmer than he had since bringing them here the night before.

Tommy... Tommy wanted to be mad at him. He wanted to hate him and still be scared of him but in all reality that just wasn’t possible right now. Hate was a strong emotion that at the end of the day took so much more energy than Tommy had to spare.

No matter what happened between them as The Blade and Theseus, they were still just Techno and Tommy. Techno saved Tommy’s life last night. He saved him, brought him somewhere safe, went through the trouble of making sure someone knew to stop Dream from revealing Theseus’s identity, patched his wounds and healed what injuries he could.

Techno didn’t want to hurt Tommy. And at the end of the day, Tommy didn’t see the point in trying to hurt Techno. He had already been dragged so deep into this shit show, there was no point in expanding the energy to make it worse or pretend this was something it wasn’t.

Techno cared about Tommy, and Tommy cared about Techno. It was easier to just live with that for now and work out their convoluted past when they actually had the time and energy.

Claw-tipped fingers combing through his damn hair was a welcome distraction from the restless prickling in his leg muscles and the spreading heat of pain in his joints. He tried to put his focus into the irregular motions of fingers picking apart and retwisting his curls instead of the rhythmic pounding of pain everywhere in time with his heartbeat.

Everything hurt and he was so tired. But sleep was nowhere to be found.

Maybe it was the thought that, despite everything they managed to get through talking today, they hadn't solved a single problem.

Despite having gone over every event the four of them went through in the last few months, from Theseus's death, to Wilbur's secret mission investigating Schlatt's operation out of the Last Chance Casino, to Techno working with Karl Jacobs and Foolish to Phil's encounter with the blood vines and trigger... they had nothing.

Tommy was still screwed. Schlatt was still after him and the cops still didn't know about his powers and under it all he was still hiding his past as Theseus. Ranboo still wasn't answering Techno after going to take care of Dream the night before. Schlatt still had Tubbo. Crumb was still dead.

They still didn't know what Karl meant when he said Tommy was the crux point of this all. They had no idea what "The Egg" really was or how much danger the bloodvines put them in. They had no idea what to do with any of the information they had just put out on the table between them.

Everything had changed but at the same time, nothing was different.

The fingers in his hair never stopped moving, but eventually, even they weren't enough to keep his mind from wandering further and further away from his aching body.

--

"And I..." Tommy trailed off, trying to figure out what to say next.

He remembered what happened in the fight last night, or at least he thought he did. But now when he tried to reach for the memories it was like he was being met with a wall. It wasn't a solid wall, per se, but like a thick fog.

He remembered what happened, but almost like it was a movie he saw a long time ago. He knew that Techno grabbed him and threw him into the wall, just out of arm's reach. But after that... he knows he ended up on the ground while everyone fought around him, but he didn't remember using his powers, or picking up the gun, or even why he picked it up.

"You don't have to force yourself if you can't Tommy," Techno said, voice uncharacteristically soft. "I can just tell them later."

Tommy frowned at the floor as he kept mentally staring at the wall in front of the answers they were asking for.

“I can’t remember who shot him,” Tommy muttered. His hand remembered the weight of the gun though, the pressure it took to pull the trigger. He looked up at Techno. “It wasn’t me, was it? I...I didn’t kill him, right?”

“Tech, what’s he talking about?” Wilbur whispered quickly, a look of panic flashing over his face.

“You didn’t kill anyone Tommy,” Techno reassured, not even glancing Wilbur’s way. “We don’t have to keep going, I can just tell them later.”

Tommy stared at him for a moment longer, still trying to remember who he saw shoot The Handler before giving up. He shook his head.

“What, so we wait for me to leave the room so I can listen through paper-thin walls when you tell them I tried to shoot myself?” he smiled, feeling numb as his eyes found the floor again. “Seems pretty stupid when you think about it.”

The silence after he spoke could have been mere seconds or stretched on for hours and Tommy wouldn’t have known the difference.

The first thing he noticed was how numb his hands felt. They were definitely there because he was looking at them, but they felt so hot and so cold at the same time that it was like they weren’t there at all. He felt the pressure of the tears that dripped onto them from his chin, but he couldn’t tell if the salty water was warm or if the trails they left behind made him feel cold.

When had he started crying?

“Oh *Tommy*, ” Wilbur breathed, his voice cracking on the last syllable.

This time Tommy didn’t stop the broken laugh that forced through his cracked lips. “I’m just so *tired*, ” he laughed, tears still streaming down his face.

And then he broke.

Tommy thought that at one point in his life he was probably a loud crier. He used to be a much louder person in all honesty. Even growing up in the foster system he was abrasive, disruptive and unapologetically himself for most of his younger years. But time changed that, time and experience changed him until he was quiet.

He cried quietly for years, the silence closed in until he had days where words didn’t come. It only got worse once he became a vigilante, the silence a safety blanket from the dangers that came with drawing attention.

He hadn’t been so quiet the night before, too angry and scared to fully break down while lashing out at Techno. But the loud parts came more from the yelling and less from his sobs.

Tommy was practically screaming as he fell apart in Wilbur’s arms.

Loud, ugly sobs wracked his frame, sparking little fires of pain of every bruised bone and scrape on his body. He gasped for breath in short bursts between sobs and words that tumbled out of his mouth in a great flood of broken sentences.

“I—I’m so *tired!*” he cried, fingers digging into Wilbur’s bicep as the man pulled him closer until Tommy all but collapsed against him.

Spit and snot joined the tears staining his skin but he barely even noticed as he drove his head into Wilbur’s shoulder.

“I was— I wanted to shoot him b-b-but—” he sobbed “—I *couldn’t do it*. He tried to kill you and he was gonna k-kill Tech—” he gasped, his words slurring slightly as he pressed on. “I just wanted it to be *done*.”

He sobbed again and gasped painful breaths through a sore throat and weak lungs. His head was pounding and his pace was tingling and he felt like he couldn’t *breathe*—

“Tommy—” Phil was there, when did he move? “—breathe, mate. You’re starting to hyperventilate and we don’t want you passing out on us, just breathe in for five, mate, c’mon. Out for seven, you got this.”

Tommy, in fact, did not “got this” and continued to sob and ramble as though he hadn’t heard Phil.

“I just wanted— to keep eve-r-ryone *safe* b-but no one’s safe around m- *me*.”

There was a hand on his face. Voices were talking over each other and none of it made sense to Tommy.

“B-but no one’s safe *anywhere!*” he wailed with what little breath he managed to keep in his lungs. “I wasn’t even t-there and she’s still *dead!*”

His fingers were trembling so badly that he lost his grip on Wilbur’s sleeve and somehow ended up slumping forward with the only thing supporting him, the arms still around his chest.

They were all still talking, at him or arguing, he couldn’t be sure. The only sound he heard was the pounding of his own heart in his ears and gasping hiccups as his body refused to take in more air.

The hand on his face was gone and when he felt himself being moved his vision swam dangerously, tears hiding the darkness creeping on his vision until it was too late.

When the world started to come back to him, everything was fuzzy.

His fingers and toes felt like they were made of static while his face felt like dozens of little pins and needles raced across his cheeks and lips. His head was pounding in time with his heart and felt like it weighed a million pounds where it rested against something hard and warm.

“—does Niki know?” a voice said, rumbling in time with the thing his head rested on.

“I don’t think so.” Oh, that was Techno replying. He must still be leaning on Wilbur then. “He seemed pretty committed to keeping it quiet. Don’t blame him, all things considered.”

Tommy felt like a wet towel that had been twisted up and wrung out. He felt too heavy for what little strength remained in his pulverized muscles.

“Have you heard anything back from him?” Phil asked.

“No, I’ve been texting him all morning and getting nothing. But until we have cops busting down the door looking for Theseus we can probably assume that he got the job done. I tried texting Niki a few times too but she’s not replying either.”

“I’ll call her in a bit,” Wilbur said with a sigh that made Tommy’s head shift against his shoulder. “As important as keeping Tommy safe is, I don’t think he’d forgive us if anything happened to Ranboo too.”

Tommy winced weakly at the disruption and the shoulder shook lightly with laughter, making him groan in annoyance.

“Sorry,” Wilbur said, the arm wrapped around Tommy squeezing him gently. “You scared us there for a second. Feeling any better?”

Tommy shook his head without lifting it, too tired to attempt anything else.

“I’m not surprised,” Phil sighed, his voice closer than before. A hand pushed the hair out of Tommy’s face and rested against his forehead, blessedly cool against this burning skin. “You weren’t out for more than a few seconds but fainting is a bitch either way. You wanna go lay down for a bit?”

Tommy barely nodded but it was impossible for Phil to miss with his hand against Tommy’s head.

“Okay, let’s do that,” he said, a smile apparent in his voice. “I think that is *more* than enough talking for one day.”

--

Wilbur noticed almost immediately when Techno’s hand paused its movement through Tommy’s hair.

“*Shit*,” he whispered. His entire body visibly tensed under Tommy, who was still using him as a pillow.

“What’s wrong?” Wilbur asked from his spot at the other end of the couch under Tommy’s legs.

“Ranboo—” he cut himself off, glancing down at Tommy’s sleeping form.

Wilbur also turned his attention to the boy with a frown. As much as he was trying his best to keep treating Tommy like normal he wasn't stupid, Tommy was in a very vulnerable place right now and if anything happened to Ranboo...

"Tommy," he whispered, poking Tommy lightly in the knee.

The boy didn't react at all, his breathing still even and deep with sleep. Wilbur looked up and met Techno's eyes with a questioning look. Techno frowned slightly before resuming his gentle combing through Tommy's mostly dry hair.

Neither of them said anything for a few minutes, listening to the quiet sounds of Phil rapidly writing emails and texting contacts from the cracked bedroom door.

"Ranboo's fine," Techno clarified after a moment, most likely for Tommy's benefit if he was somehow still awake. Though he looked visibly unsettled as he made eye contact with Wilbur as he continued. "He's alive but..."

Wilbur resisted the urge to grimace. "Fine and alive aren't exactly the same thing," he replied as the silence stretched, inclining his head in Tommy's direction to illustrate his point.

He stared down at the boy in his lap for another long moment before sighing.

"Ranboo turned himself in," Techno said, jaw clenching as he visibly swallowed. "*Endwalker* turned himself in. And Nix was the one who made the arrest."

Chapter End Notes

So. Much. Plot.

Also sorry for the cliffhanger but I just had to set up a little prep for the huge tone switch that is the next chapter and probably the one after it. Originally the next Ranboo pov chapter was supposed to be posted before this one but I just wanted to keep it slow with sbi for a little bit. Of course, as always they won't be gone too long, I try not to let anything sit unaddressed when I can.

I'm very sleepy but follow me on [Twitter](#) if you like updates about why the next chapter is taking so long lol. If there's gonna be more long breaks like this I'll probably say something about it there and on the [Discord Server](#).

Also there's ART!!!



Whisper by HannahKat on the JOM Discord

[Tubbo](#), [Tommy](#) and [Ranboo](#) from my Twitter

If you've made it this far feel free to leave Kudos and a comment, I love hearing what people are thinking even if its just keyboard smashing in my direction for the things I've done <3

Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Niki's concerns over Ranboo grow.

A stranger asks Aimsey for a favour.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the hiatus, since the last update I moved, lost custody of my cat, my dog died, went to England, saw Lovejoy, got mugged and developed a qsmp hyperfixation. Not sure how I feel about this new season of my life but I'm still here!

Also this chapter is brought to you by *So Much (For) Stardust* by Fall Out Boy because I just looped that entire album while writing this.

TW/CW for magical body horror. Welcome back and enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Niki turned to the cooling pot of pasta on the stove and sighed.

Ranboo had been on the phone when she had finished the food so she had decided to wait until he was done to let him know.

When the muffled sound of his voice through his bedroom door eventually quieted, she glanced down the hall to find the bathroom door now shut, light pouring from under the door into the darkness. Without a second thought, she called out that dinner was ready and returned to serve herself while it was still warm.

But after finishing her meal, there was still no sign of Ranboo.

Niki frowned at what was left of the food for a moment longer, trying to ignore the growing feeling of apprehension clawing at her.

Ranboo hadn't been the same since his accidental adventure through the nether, but that was to be expected. Sadly it didn't make it any easier to watch or deal with.

At first, it was easy to understand why he was a bit out of it, between whatever the heck happened when he and Techno got separated from everyone in the nether and Tommy's

disappearance the following day. But something about the last few days after the Tempest hurricane was...different.

She had no reason to believe anything had changed between his return from the hospital and then, but she was growing certain something had. By the time she got home from the disaster recovery the Rocket Agency had been assigned, he was still asleep well past noon. Since then he had spent most of his time in his room, sleeping and often only sneaking out to eat leftovers long after Niki went to bed herself.

If she was being honest, it seemed a lot more like growing depression than the kind of paranoia she would have expected to linger after a traumatic experience.

She had tried giving him space, but was eventually forced into bullying her way into a conversation about making sure he was eating properly. When she pressed him about eating outside of his room tonight he caved and specifically requested spaghetti. Yet here he was, still avoiding it for whatever reason.

Something was to give sooner than later and Niki was going to make sure it wasn't something at Ranboo's expense. She was going to get to the bottom of this.

Decision made, she headed down the short hall, coming to a stop at the still locked bathroom door.

She knocked. "Ranboo? Your dinner's getting cold kiddo. I made spaghetti like you wanted, remember?"

A beat of silence.

"Just put it in the fridge, I'll have some later," Ranboo replied, voice wavering slightly.

Niki frowned, hand coming to rest on the door handle. "Everything alright? You've been in there for a while."

"Yeah I'm fine," he replied, just a little too quickly. "Think I just have a stomach bug or something. Sorry for hogging the bathroom for so long."

Niki pursed her lips and resisted the urge to sigh. Her parents had enough foster kids over the years for her to recognize Ranboo's behaviour right now, but that didn't make it any less frustrating to deal with.

"Ranboo if you're sick or hurt, you know you can come to me. I've told you that since day one, buddy."

"I—" he paused for a moment. "I know, I just didn't want to bother you. It's really not that bad anyway, I can take care of myself."

Fear of rejection and hyper-independence, textbook behaviours for neglected children. Hard to get around if you don't recognize it but not impossible if you know what you're looking for. The reality was that support and repetition were some of the most effective ways to help them heal.

“I know you can take care of yourself, but you don’t have to. If you’re throwing up then it could be something serious, can I come in and check on you?” She asked gently.

“N-no thanks, you really don’t have to.”

She pressed down slowly to test the handle and met the resistance of the lock. However, like most of the locks in her apartment, it would only take a bobby pin to open in a matter of seconds.

“Ranboo, please let me in,” she tried again. “I just want to make sure you’re safe, okay?”

“I promise I’m fine Niki, p-please just leave me alone. I’ll be fine in a little bit.”

Yeah no. Niki did *not* like the way his voice was starting to waver. In the three months Ranboo had been living with her he hadn’t cried once. He certainly wasn’t a stranger to getting emotional, but he didn’t cry because the tears would burn his skin. Right now he sounded like he was seconds away from breaking down sobbing.

“Okay, I’m sorry but I’m not comfortable trusting you to know that’s true right now so I’m coming in, okay?” she said, already sliding the bobby pin into the small hole on the outside of the handle that would pop open the lock.

“Wait Niki please don’t—” the lock clicked and she started to twist the handle, “—wait *please!*”

The urgency in his voice only made her push the door open faster. Her heart raced as a million scenarios went through her head, none of them good and all of them with Ranboo hurting and crying on the bathroom floor, begging to be left alone to suffer.

What she actually found almost made her heart stop.

Ranboo didn’t seem hurt and he wasn’t crying. She had expected to find him in his pyjamas bent over the toilet and feverish with whatever bug had him down for the last few days. She had thought this was going to be a huge turning point with him in their fragile guardian-foster kid relationship.

What she did not expect to be faced with was a masked vigilante, half geared up and levelling a gun at her as he knelt on her bathroom floor.

Nix had never crossed paths with this particular vigilante, but he was one of the most famous in the city after so many years of avoiding capture. Endwalker was in her apartment, holding her at gunpoint in her bathroom doorway.

His hands were shaking so much that she doubted he could hit her even if he pulled the trigger.

Every instinct of a hero in her body screamed for her to disarm him, to call upon the water in the pipes that ran under the floor and through the walls and make him drop the gun before he could decide to do anything with it. But she couldn’t, she couldn’t hurt him.

Despite how obvious the jacket and kevlar vest draped over the side of the tub or the weapons strapped to his hip made his identity, there was no denying who was underneath the mask.

His red t-shirt decorated with The Blade's logo that she distinctly remembered buying did little to hide the bare skin of his arms or their mismatched colours. And without the jacket's hood he had nothing to hide his hair, the split between black and white even messier than usual as though he had been nervously tugging at it again.

She swallowed, opening her mouth to speak only to freeze when Ranboo flinched. They stared in tense silence for a long moment.

"I a-asked you not to come in," he stuttered eventually. His hands still shook but the gun stayed levelled at Niki's chest. "Dammit I *begged* you— what— ender what am I gonna *do*?"

Niki tried to steady herself with a shallow breath. "Why don't we start," she said slowly, "by putting the gun down before someone gets hurt."

She couldn't see his eyes through the mask but there was an obvious switch in his demeanor when she spoke. In between one breath and the next they went from Ranboo fearfully holding her at gunpoint to Endwalker's cold calculation.

"And what guarantee do I get that the second I put it down you're not gonna hurt me?" Endwalker asked, the shake in his hands lessening. "And even if you don't, what's gonna stop you from running and telling the world who I am?"

Niki pursed her lips still unmoving in the doorway. "Do you want my honest answer, Ranboo?"

"Yes," Endwalker replied, voice barely wavering.

"The only thing stopping me from hurting you or turning you in is my honest, genuine affection for you," she said plainly. "You've trapped yourself between a sink and a shower with a toilet at your back. If I wanted you disarmed and hurt, you would have been disarmed and hurt the second I opened the door."

Endwalker stilled at her words, head barely tilting as he seemed to glance between the sink and shower head, both still dry as bone. Niki waited patiently for his reply, her eyes flicking between his mask and the finger still resting lightly above the trigger.

"You expect me to believe that you still care about me when I'm a vigilante holding you at gunpoint in your own home?" he asked eventually, abruptly sounding a lot more like Ranboo than Endwalker. "Even after I've lied to you this entire time?"

Niki felt her lips twitch and forced herself to smile fully. "Well, I don't know that I expect you to believe it, but it is the truth. And besides, I lied to you about my real occupation for almost as long and you seemed to forgive me pretty easily." Her smile slowly dropped as she realized the full weight of that choice. "Though honestly, I'm surprised you'd stay after

knowing who I am. It's no accident that Endwalker never crossed Nix's path in the last two years."

Without the tall collar of his jacket to hide behind, she could see the way his throat bobbed when he swallowed. "I stayed because I thought Endwalker was behind me and you'd never have to know."

The firearm remained steady in his hands.

Niki hummed a quiet sound of understanding. "What changed?"

Finally, the vigilante's finger lifted from the trigger. His arms visibly shook with strain as they slowly lowered, sparing Niki the sight of the gun's barrel.

"Dream," Ranboo sighed as he flicked the safety of the gun and gingerly set it on the floor beside him.

Niki tried her best to hide her sigh of relief once the gun was out of the teen's hand. She watched in silence as Ranboo reached up to the straps of his mask and undid them, setting the mask aside on the floor opposite the gun.

After a moment of internal debate she slowly lowered herself to the floor, crossing her legs to sit in the doorway across from Ranboo. The last thing she wanted to do was make him feel threatened when she was hoping to comfort him.

"What did Dream do to warrant you getting a gun?" she asked, eyeing the weapon curiously. "I had always heard Endwalker had a pretty strict no-killing and minimal maiming rule."

Ranboo sat back with a sigh, slowly drawing his legs up to hug his knees to his chest. "I— I don't know what else to do. Dream— he— he found out that Theseus is alive and knows his identity. I'm the only one that knows and I only have a few hours to figure out how to keep him from talking. And I can't find any way to contact Memoir for a non-lethal solution so here I am." He pursed his lips as he turned to glare at the firearm on the tiles next to him. "As much as it goes against everything I've ever tried to fight for, I can't—" he sighed. "I can't lose Theseus too. I've already lost so much, I can't lose him too."

Niki watched him as he spoke, her heart aching as the pieces quickly started to fall into place.

Endwalker wasn't a solo vigilante, he was a well known associate of a number of other vigilantes. Vigilantes that hadn't been heard from in almost as long as Endwalker himself. Vigilantes that were presumed dead or quietly moved on to other careers.

"Amnesia," Niki said, making Ranboo flinch. "She moved on to be a hero intern under the name Calico and then a few days ago mysteriously turned up... dead. Along with an injured Captian Sparklez in the middle of Sky Memorial."

Ranboo stared at the floor as he spoke. "We were trying to save Haywire from Schlatt," he admitted. "I was going to go alone but they offered to help and I got them killed and couldn't even save Haywire in the end. I wasn't fast enough."

It was like a knife slowly sinking deeper and deeper into the heart, watching the pure misery on Ranboo's face. Niki had to close her eyes against the sudden sting of tears threatening to well up. "Oh, Ranboo..."

"A-and I thought I had already failed Tommy but he's *so close* to being safe and the only thing standing in the way is Dream but—" his voice cracked and Niki opened her eyes to the sight of him with his head tipped back, tears running freely down his cheeks with trails of steam behind them. "I'm so scared Niki. I—I can't mess this up but I can't—I'm so scared of him. I can't take on Dream alone but I don't have anyone left to turn to and I'm terrified."

At the sight of his tears, Niki couldn't stop herself from closing the distance between them. Ranboo flinched when her hands met his shoulders but he didn't resist as she pulled him into a hug, letting his head rest against her shoulder as she wrapped him in her arms.

For a while neither of them said anything, Niki sitting in silence as Ranboo quietly shuddered in her arms. The only sounds between them were Ranboos hiccuping sobs and Niki offering the occasional shush or hum or assurance.

It was a lot to process.

Calico and Captain Sparklez risked everything to help Endwalker protect Haywire from Schlatt. But why? What did the villain need from the vigilante? Why wouldn't Sparklez call it in or tell someone?

Perhaps it was because Sparklez knew too much. There was no denying how much he risked by publicly sponsoring Calico when she was obviously just Amnesia under a new name. Did he know that Ranboo was Endwalker too? Did he know Haywire's identity?

Or maybe it all tied back to Theseus somehow. Ranboo had said Dream knew Theseus's identity and that he lived, but then said it was Tommy's freedom that was at risk. Tommy was Theseus.

Theseus, who supposedly died in the first recorded fight utilizing Trigger all those months ago. What did these young vigilantes know that the heroes didn't? What did Haywire leave out when he snuck his information into the Trigger briefing?

What was so important that Sparklez would risk so much?

But more importantly, how was Niki going to fix this?

"I know how terrifying this must be," Niki said after Ranboo's tears eventually subsided, "but you're going to have to be brave for just a little bit longer, Ranboo. I'll help you deal with Dream. You're right in saying you couldn't do it alone, but unfortunately neither can I."

She felt as he shook his head against her collar bone before slowly pulling away from her embrace. "No Niki I couldn't possibly ask you—"

"You're not asking," Niki cut him off. "I'm offering. We will deal with Dream and Spectre to keep Tommy safe, and then we'll see if there's anything we can do to get Haywire back. Does

that sound good to you?”

Ranboo stared at her with wide eyes, still puffy and irritated from the tears against his sensitive skin. There was still some lingering sadness under the surface she didn't quite understand.

“Too good to be true maybe,” he sighed, eyes flicking back to the firearm still on the floor beside them. In a rare moment of confidence, he made direct eye contact with her. “But against my better judgment I want to trust you.”

Niki managed to crack a smile at that. “And against my better judgment, I do trust you.” She glanced between the gun and Ranboo. “I take it you know where Dream is?”

“I know where he's going to be,” Ranboo replied, no longer meeting her eyes as his gaze returned to the floor. “I just don't know where to find Memoir. If we can get Dream and Spectre to him, then we can have their memories of Tommy's identity removed without hurting them. That was my original plan but— well here's where that got me.” He laughed nervously, fingers picking at a loose thread on his cargo pants.

Niki hummed, silently weighing their options.

There were heroes she knew of that could alter memories, but none that she would trust to keep the very secrets they were trying to take away from Dream and Spectre. Memoir was definitely their best option in that department.

Niki also knew of some heroes that could track people down, that could figure out where Memoir was. But that left them with another problem of trust. If any of those heroes *did* find the location of the city's most dangerous info broker, they would start planning a full raid to arrest the man, not tell Nix and Endwalker where to find him unhindered.

And if there were any vigilantes or rogues that Endwalker knew who could help them, she was sure Ranboo would have gone straight to them to beg for assistance long before starting to plan a double homicide.

Then Niki had a terrible idea. A terrible idea that involved calling in a long standing debt from a friend that she had hoped to never use. A terrible idea that would use the childish ideals of an intern who wouldn't know any better when a hero asked for their help.

“I think I may know someone who can help us find Memoir,” she sighed. She took one of Ranboo's hands in her own and squeezed it once, he squeezed back in a silent sign of acknowledgement. “I just need to call in a few favours.”

Aimsey sighed as she finally pulled herself up onto the rooftop, a slight breeze tugging at her hood as she took in her surroundings.

It was late, but not so late that the city was asleep yet. In the distance she could hear shouting and laughing, car tires on wet pavement and high heels clicking against the sidewalk, the signs of life that had been missing from the city for days. As quick as the rain stopped just after sunset, life was breathed back into the city and it was business as usual.

Aimsey wanted to hate it, wanted to resent the world for moving on as usual even when nothing was the same, but she understood all too well. It was the circle of life. Just because one of Aimsey's friends died this time didn't change the fact that everyone else's lives would move on. Those that knew Crumb would mourn and those that didn't would never know, just like any other day when any other stranger died.

It sucked, but it was life. The world would keep turning and Aimsey would move with it, going about her own strange life as usual.

For a minute she frowned, worried that she had lost the spirit she had followed up here. Then a flash of movement at the edge of her vision made her turn to find the ghost standing on the next roof over, their form wispy like smoke in the wind.

They seemed to stare at her for a moment before vanishing and reappearing further away.

She hesitated for a moment, looking around one last time hoping to catch a glimpse of Beep. Her usual ghostly companion had been missing since the hospital and she kept hoping that doing something this reckless would be enough to draw him back to her side. Aimsey had never snuck out to follow a random spirit without Beep by her side to make sure she was safe. Yet here she was and he was nowhere to be found.

Another flicker of movement drew her attention back to the spirit as it appeared back at the edge of the roof. Its hand moved in a slow beckoning motion and Aimsey sighed. She was on her own for this one.

After some less-than-advisable parkour to get across the rooftops, the spirit led her to a small wooden shed. It waited a moment for her to approach before vanishing through the door inside.

Aimsey stopped a few feet from the shed, trying to ignore the feeling of eyes on the back of her neck. The energy here was...off. It wouldn't surprise her if this spirit was only one of a few that had a connection to this place.

Wasn't that just Aimsey's luck? She had been hoping to be led to an abandoned pet or lost item that the ghost cared about only to probably find a lost crime scene instead. Classic ghost hunting karma.

The shed itself looked fairly innocent. The old wooden planks that made up its walls melted naturally into the shadows cast by distant street lights. It was nestled back against the wall of a taller building that had no alley separating it from the lower roof that the shed stood on. Both sides of the shed were guarded by small aviaries filled with the barely illuminated forms of sleeping pigeons.

If it weren't for the fact that a lost spirit had just led her here, she probably wouldn't even give the shed a second thought. It was probably just a tool shed full of things to maintain the aviaries. Was it really too much to hope there would only be tools inside if she opened the door?

Normally Beep would be here to check for her. He would pop his head through the door and if there was anything bad on the other side he'd warn her. Usually, Aimsey would just get him to describe it before calling the cops with an anonymous tip about a crime scene and then be on her way. Another night, another cold case solved by a murder victim seeking out Aimsey.

But Beep wasn't here. For the first time in years, Aimsey was completely alone without a familiar face, dead or alive, in sight.

She sucked in a deep breath, steeling herself before stepping into the shadows and closing the distance to the shed.

Picking the padlock that held the door shut wasn't the hard part. Aimsey had picked dozens of locks over the years, often having to break into abandoned apartments or cars to help a ghost with their unfinished business. A hardware store combination lock wasn't anything challenging.

What was challenging was the rank scent clawing its way down her throat and making her eyes sting.

From a slight distance one could easily mistake the smell for bird poop and garbage, part of the normal nastiness that came with city life. But the second she was within arm's reach of the door it became clear it was something else entirely. Something inside the shed.

Aimsey was unfortunately familiar with the scent of death. Try as she might to avoid actually seeing the murder victims she's located over the years, there was no avoiding the smell. Decay and rot always had a distinct heaviness to it, no matter how old the corpse it came from.

This scent wasn't death, but it wasn't *not* death. It was more, like the tang of iron from fresh blood but also the dust of a decades old skeleton in a junkyard. It was heavy and humid like a landfill but sickeningly sharp like acid. Whatever the smell was, it was *wrong*. It was a horrific combination that should never exist and it was coming from *inside the shed*.

Every drop of common sense Aimsey had left was telling her to stop. Whatever was inside the shed wasn't something she wanted out but her hands just kept moving. It was like watching a car crash, you couldn't stand to see it but you just couldn't look away.

With every breath, the air felt warmer and tasted worse. Her eyes stung and her nose watered as though someone had smashed a thousand onions and hidden them just beyond the door. It was awful, but whatever it was it was inevitable. It was like she had no choice but to just keep going—

The lock clicked and slid open.

Aimsey hesitated with the weight of the lock resting in her palm, the pick and rake still jammed inside. All she had to do was unhook the lock and pull the door open. What she *should* do was take back her lock pick and make sure the door never opened again.

Once again it felt like her hands were moving without her permission, slowly lifting the lock, unhooking it from the latch. One hand cradled the lock in her palm as the other reached for the rusted handle. The hinges protested with loud screeching and the putrid stench seemed to double the second the door cracked open.

A sudden piercing ringing nearly made Aimsey's heart jump out of her chest and she flinched, sending the lock in her hand flying and flinging the door open with a rattling crash.

It was only after the sound stopped that she realized the ringing was just her phone going off in her pocket. But that was decidedly the furthest thing from her mind at the moment. The door was still creaking, swinging closed again but not fast enough to hide the nightmare within the shed.

The entire interior of the little shack was lined with glistening, blood-red vines. The slick plants were twisted and woven into a living tapestry of red, red, *red*. Red vines, red leaves, red mushrooms, red flowers, all woven so close together that not an inch of wood or light was visible between them. Small flashes of rusted metal and colourful tool handles were easily lost in the mess of flora, faded either by time or something else.

The ghost that led Aimsey here was nowhere to be found, but it wasn't hard to spot what the spirit had led her here for.

The young corpse settled in the centre of the shed was practically part of the plants, the red vines twisting into her body like raw muscles and sinews that made the places where limbs began and plants ended indistinguishable. The entire right side of her face had been consumed by the vines, a bright red flower blooming where her eye socket would be.

But the other half of her face was untouched. It was pale and rubbery in the way that only a dead face could be but it was not rotten, it was not swollen or disfigured in the way a body became even just hours after life fled it. It was like her body was frozen in time, touched only by the plants.

This time Aimsey found herself agreeing with her instincts as they screamed *wrong, wrong, wrong*. The stench of rot and blood was suffocating but there was nothing visibly rotting. There were two more bodies intertwined with the vines and both of them were much the same, parts of them indistinguishable from the plants while the visible parts remained pristine. Dead but not decaying.

It was *wrong*. This wasn't death, this was something worse. Something that Aimsey needed to stop. Whatever dark magic was at play here could not be allowed to spread, it would throw the whole world out of balance if it did. It would disrupt the natural cycle of life and death in the most horrific way and she could *not* let that happen.

The phone in her pocket buzzed again, chiming out her ring tone insistently.

She stared silently at the cursed corpses, unable to look away.

The phone went silent.

The longer she stared the more certain she was she could see the plants growing before her eyes. The vines slowly pulsing like veins, creeping ever so slowly along the edges of the door frame and the corpses.

The phone started to ring again.

Aimsey's hands were shaking but she felt paralyzed by the scene before her.

The phone continued to ring.

She needed to answer it. If it was her mom she would be grounded for the rest of her life for sneaking out and then not answering.

The phone went silent again.

What...who put these bodies here? What was it doing to them?

The phone started to ring again and this time Aimsey managed to answer it with shaking hands.

"Hello?" a woman asked when Aimsey offered no greeting.

It was only then that Aimsey realized she hadn't looked at the caller ID. That was definitely not her mother's voice. But if the extended awkward silence was anything to go by, it was a spam caller either.

"Hello?" the woman repeated. *"I'm looking for Aimsey, is anyone there?"*

Aimsey swallowed hard before finally tearing her eyes away from the shed. "Who is this?" she asked, hoping the shake in her voice wasn't audible.

There was a pause. *"This is Hemlock, from the Dream Agency,"* the woman replied. *"I'm looking to speak with Mania, is this her?"*

On any other day, Aimsey might have questioned why one of the pro heroes from the Dream agency was calling her personal number well after midnight, but her mind was feeling a bit scattered at the moment. It didn't even occur to her to question if the woman's claims were lies.

"This is her," Aimsey answered slowly. "I— um— How can I help you, Hemlock? Bit of an odd time for a phone call," she laughed awkwardly.

"Yeah it is, sorry to wake you. And sorry for having to call at all, I pulled your number from the agency records."

That finally kicked a little sense back into Aimsey's brain as she considered what that meant. "You pulled— isn't that a huge breach of privacy? The academy terminated all their student internships for the rest of the year so I'm not even a current employee—"

"It's an emergency," Hemlock interrupted. "Like I said, I'm very sorry but I need to ask you for a favour."

The breeze picked back up, stirring up the unpleasant smell of the vines and making Aimsey's stomach flip dangerously. There was too much happening right now for her to really worry about what Hemlock was doing, Aimsey had bigger fish to fry.

"R-right, sure. I'm gonna guess you need my powers for something then?" Hopefully, it was something she could get a little time to work on, even if Beep were here to help her figure things out it still took him a while to stay on track. Without him, her "clairvoyance" was going to be a lot slower.

There was a short pause. *"You do understand the kind of favour I'm asking for, right Mania?"*

Aimsey resisted the urge to sigh. Her eyes darted from the edge of the roof to the shed and back. "Yeah, a professional one I'd assume. Discretion, a favour for a favour and all that. I agree, so tell me what you need to know and I'll tell you if I can help."

Another beat of hesitation then a short sigh. *"I need the rogue Memoir's location as soon as possible,"* Hemlock answered curtly. *"Nix—"*

This time Aimsey couldn't stop herself from sighing. "No," she cut Hemlock off. "I can't help you, sorry."

"Wait just let me explain," Hemlock protested. *"Nix is working with one of Memoir's allies and they need his powers to save lives. Dream and Spectre's lives, to be specific."*

Spectre.

Spectre, Aimsey's mentor and just one in the quickly growing list of people she was powerless to help. Without Beep around to help track him down Aimsey had been secretly worried the hero was already dead. Yet here she was with his life in her hands and she was still completely powerless on her own.

"Dammit," she cursed under her breath. *"Shit. Hemlock I mean I literally can't—"*

Industrial lot 2234, warehouse nine, bay two.

Aimsey flinched at the sudden voice whispering in her other ear and nearly lost her grip on her phone. She fumbled to catch it at the last second and stared forward as her brain raced to understand what was happening.

She knew that voice, but it was probably about the last thing she was ready to deal with right now. Despite herself, she turned to meet the familiar yet strange eyes of one of her newly dead best friends.

Crumb stared back, eyes creasing slightly as she smiled under her disposable mask. Still, they didn't light up with any happiness, she somehow looked almost as devastated as Aimsey felt at that moment.

Industrial lot 2234, warehouse nine, bay two, the ghost repeated. Tell her then hang up, we— she sighed— *we need to talk.*

Distantly Aimsey could hear Hemlock calling for her through the phone, but she paid the words no mind as she raised the phone again.

“—everything alright?”

“Industrial lot 2234, warehouse nine, bay two,” Aimsey recited numbly. “Memoir is in the industrial district. Lot 2234, warehouse nine, bay two. I— sorry I need to go, good luck saving them.”

“*Wait Mania! What's wrong? Are you—*”

Aimsey didn't even look at the screen as she ended the call and let her arm fall limp at her side. For a minute all she could do was stare. Crumb stared back, one of her ears twitching as the breeze picked up even though she couldn't feel it.

Crumb looked...better than last time Aimsey saw her ghost. She hadn't seen her since the hospital either, and then her ghost had looked much the same as her corpse, if not significantly more distressed. Now there was no sign of her bloody hero uniform or her injuries, just regular old Crumb in her school uniform with a mask hiding the lower half of her face.

You look tired, Crumb said eventually, breaking the silence.

Aimsey took a deep breath to steady herself but the scent of rot only made her feel more nauseous. “Yeah,” Aimsey agreed weakly. “I haven't been sleeping very well since...” *the hospital* went unspoken.

Yeah. Crumb's tail flicked behind her. *Sorry.*

“Not your fault king,” she replied with a sad little smile. “I've never been a stranger to nightmares.” Her gaze strayed back to the still open shed door. “God's know there's always more horrible shit out there to add to the pile.”

Crumb's head tilted as she followed Aimsey's gaze. *You know some stuff about magic right? Considering you, uh, know Death and all that?*

“Yeah,” Aimsey said. She eyed the flower growing from the centre corpse's eye as more of the petals seemed to unfold from its core. “I know a lot more theory than practice though. And I've never heard of anything like this before. I wouldn't even know where to start cleaning this up.”

Fire, the ghost replied, drawing Aimsey's attention back to her. *This is part of an ancient power that's been growing under the city for months. The only thing that can hurt it is magic*

and the only thing I've heard can actually destroy it is fire from runes.

Aimsey frowned, turning back to the shed as she considered that. Flame was one of the runes she actually had memorized, but only the version to enchant weapons. Without the proper tools it would take a lot of energy to carve that kind of thing by hand.

“How do you know about this?” Aimsey asked, gesturing towards the vines. “If it's been here for months, why haven't the heroes dealt with it yet?”

At the hospital you said you would help figure out everything about Schlatt's operation, Crumb started slowly. And I thought that sounded like a good idea so I used my newfound free time to start digging and...it all comes back to this.

“But I thought— I thought Schlatt's entire operation was about Trigger? What does it have to do with an ancient demon plant?”

It's complicated, she replied, making Aimsey chuckle. She could hear the smile in Crumb's voice as she continued. Understatement of the year, I know. But yes, as far as even the men working for Schlatt are concerned, his end goal is control over the Trigger and a second drug that erases people's powers. But it's so much deeper than that, Trigger and the eraser are just a bonus on top of what Schlatt really needs Tubbo and Tommy's powers for. But that's going to have to be a conversation for another time.

“Wait, why? But you know all the secrets about Schlatt's operation! You have to tell me so I can pass it on to the heroes, Crumb. Please don't”

We don't have the time right now, but I promise I'll explain it all later. Right now I— she sighed— I need to ask for your help. I need you to go to the industrial district just in case Endwalker, Nix and Hemlock need your help.

Aimsey blinked. “My help? Why would two pro heroes and one of the strongest vigilantes in the city need my help?”

I don't trust Memoir with them, Crumb said, running a hand through her hair nervously. Or, maybe I don't trust the heroes with him, I dunno. Four pro heroes and six vigilantes in the same room are bound to go south. If I were alive and knew what their plan was, I would go as backup myself. But I'm... not. All I can do is ask that you go in my place.

“I— Crumb...”

I know it's not fair of me to ask, but I can't stand the thought of something bad happening to Ranboo now. He already blames himself for what happened to me, I can't let him do anything stupid trying to protect Tommy to make up for it. Please, Aimsey.

Cold arms suddenly wrapped around Aimsey, shocking solid for something that shouldn't be there. Every inch of Crumb's spectral form that touched Aimsey burned like dry ice but somehow it was the warmest hug she'd had in weeks.

Her eyes burned with unshed tears as she buried her face in Crumb's freezing shoulder.

“I miss you,” Aimsey whispered instead of saying yes.

Of course her answer was yes. She was always powerless to help the people she cared for until it was too late. And maybe it was already too late to really help Crumb, but if she could help her friend by helping Ranboo and Tommy, whoever they were, then she would.

I know, Crumb whispered back.

They held the hug until Aimsey physically couldn't stand the burning cold against her skin any longer. Eventually, she gently pushed Crumb back by her shoulders and turned back to the shack full of cursed plants and corpses. The phantom burn of Crumb's touch was oddly grounding against the putrid aura of dark magic coming from the vines.

“I think I know how we can deal with this, then we help your friends,” she said, turning back to Crumb with her best heroic smile. “No one is going to die tonight.”

Crumb's eyes creased with a smile under her mask. *Not if we have anything to say about it.*

Enchanting her pocket knife with flame runes wasn't as hard as Aimsey had expected it to be. And neither was using the blade to cut through the thick layers of vines. The second the flame runes flashed with their magic, sparks leapt from the knife to the slick surface of the vines, spreading as though the surface of everything were covered in oil.

The blaze was so bright that by the time fire truck sirens rang in the distance, Aimsey could still see its light as she fled across the rooftops. At one point she glanced back and found herself pausing at the sight of a figure silhouetted against the flames.

A shiver ran down her spine as the figure turned, their eyes small pinpricks of red light in an otherwise indistinguishable blob of shadow against the firelight.

Not yet, she thought as she turned away, running as fast as she could to put distance between her and the soon to be crime scene. *It all comes back to this, just not yet.*

Chapter End Notes

I won't ever promise another timeline for posting updates because something insane always goes wrong in my life to stop me so see ya when I see ya.

That said I have art!!

[My updated Tommy, Wilbur and Techno Designs!](#)

[My brand new Niki design!](#)

If you've made it this far feel free to leave Kudos and a comment, I love hearing what people are thinking even if its just keyboard smashing in my direction for the things I've done <3

Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Ranboo realizes he has a lot to learn about trust.

Chapter Notes

this chapter... has gone through so many rewrites... so I'm just gonna post it without editing and pray it makes sense!

Sorry for the long wait, my psychologist said I have "adhd" and "depression" but could a depressed person write this? *points at incredibly depressed characters*

Mind the general tags and enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ranboo stared down at Dream's unmasked face with dread curling in his stomach as the hero glared up at him.

Everything about this felt wrong, it was too easy.

It was too easy for Nix to call in a favour with Hemlock, who got them Memoir's location in under an hour. It was too easy that the other hero hardly blinked at the sight of Endwalker hovering in Nix's shadow, agreeing to assist in their plan to capture Dream and Spectre.

It was too easy when their targets waltzed right into the trap, returning Techno's car to his apartment like they promised they would. It was too easy to take them down, Spectre was heavily injured and Dream was barely armed, both of them too slow to escape the combination Endwalker's teleportation and Hemlock's paralyzing touch.

It was too easy, in complete contrast to when everything was too hard for Endwalker to do alone.

Something had to go wrong, and the longer it took for the other shoe to drop, the more Ranboo's stomach twisted itself into knots and the harder it was to ignore the anxiety crawling up his spine.

Dream's eyes narrowed on Endwalker's mask and the vigilante looked away before he could say anything. He knew the chances of Dream realizing his identity through this process were high, but the thought of his name leaving the hero's mouth made his heart flutter with panic.

The fact that Dream looked so much like his younger sister probably wasn't helping either, his eyes only half a shade darker than Drista's unnatural and off-putting green gaze.

He really wished there was a convenient mask to put on the man's face just so Ranboo didn't have to see those eyes following his every move, but the only smile mask they managed to find in the car was cracked to pieces so there was no point.

A hand landed on his shoulder and he couldn't stop himself from jumping slightly as he turned to look down at Nix.

She gave him a small, tense smile. "This will work," she assured, squeezing his shoulder gently even as her expression betrayed her words. "We've got them here, so you go and close the deal now, right?"

Ranboo swallowed hard, hands clenching uselessly at his side. "Right," he agreed with a curt nod, ignoring the way Hemlock and her two paralyzed victims were staring at him.

He could do this. No one was going to die today and no one was going to jail, because he could do this. All he had to do was negotiate the use of one of the most dangerous powers in the city from one of the biggest hero-haters in the city. He could do that.

Memoir was a rouge and not a villain for a reason. He used to be a vigilante, he would understand where Endwalker's request was coming from.

Probably. Hopefully.

Yeah, Ranboo could do this. Totally.

Before he could let himself overthink it anymore, he stepped away from Nix with another small nod. "Stay out of sight, I'll be back soon."

Nix nodded in turn while Hemlock's eyes seemed to reflect the same hesitance on Dream and Spectre's faces.

"Good luck," Nix wished with another small smile.

Ranboo didn't smile back under his mask, but the churning in his stomach lessened ever so slightly as he closed his eyes and brought the image of the industrial district to the front of his mind. He called upon his powers and when he opened his eyes he was on the roof of a building overlooking warehouse nine on lot 2234.

His creeping fear of something going wrong was not assuaged when he was immediately met with the sight of another figure on the roof with him, turning away from warehouse nine to stare at Endwalker with wide brown eyes.

"Endwalker," they said, voice faint with surprise.

Ranboo's first observation was that he had no idea who this person was, which was probably one of the worst things that could happen right now. Someone he didn't know anything about

was a wild card being thrown into the middle of a plan that his anxieties were already starting to doubt, so really, not a great turn in the evening.

His next observation was that they weren't really...dressed like someone that should be here. They were small-- though everyone was pretty small next to Ranboo-- and dressed in a baggy black hoodie, grey camo cargo pants, and faded red converse. The lower half of their face was covered with a cloth mask and they had a black beanie with a small skull patch pulled low on their head. The hood of the sweatshirt was pulled over the beanie and their long dark hair swallowed any other features from sight.

But they wore no visible body armour, not even the basics any amateur vigilante would like knee pads or wrist braces. They weren't even wearing *gloves*. And despite all the pockets on their pants, it was pretty obvious most of them were empty, with no weapons or tools in sight.

Something was off.

"Who are you?" he said eventually after the stranger made no moves to introduce themselves. He didn't have a lot of time to waste but something told him he couldn't just ignore this.

The stranger blinked like they were surprised to be addressed despite being the only other person on the roof.

"Oh, I'm-- um--" their voice was high and unfiltered through any kind of special mask or voice changer, betraying the uncertain tone. "You can call me Orpheus, I guess," they seemed to settle on eventually.

Ranboo squinted slightly as he studied them again, hoping to find any other clues to who Orpheus really was or what they wanted.

Orpheus wasn't exactly quaking in their boots scared, but the signs were there. They shifted their weight on their feet, eyes darting to their surroundings before landing back on Endwalker looming over them. Their hands were constantly moving, fiddling with a woven orange and white bracelet around their left wrist.

Their mannerisms didn't just speak of anxiousness but also of inexperience and youth. Ranboo knew it well, having once been an inexperienced teenage vigilante himself.

It's almost sad to see it from this side. Was that what he looked like when Spade found him tasing a would-be mugger in an alley? Could all the older and more experienced vigilantes see just now nervous he was the first time Haywire brought him to a network meeting?

When did he stop looking like that? What was the turning point from a scared kid to a weary vigilante?

"Whatever it is that you're trying to accomplish here Orpheus, don't," he said, feeling confident enough to turn his back on the kid as he looked towards the warehouse again. "Just go home and enjoy your life, you don't want to get involved here."

“I--” Orpheus started, only to trail off. A small sigh. “I can’t, not if you’re planning on going in there alone.”

Ranboo blinked. He turned to look at Orpheus over his shoulder. “Go in where alone?”

He knew the answer obviously, but he needed to know what Orpheus knew.

“To meet with Memoir,” Orpheus answered with quick confidence, like they knew Endwalkers entire plan. “You shouldn’t trust him, or *any* of them. They’ve never been who they wanted you to believe they are.”

The uncomfortable knot in his stomach twisted as their words stoked the embers of his doubt. It’s always bothered him somewhat, how easily the older vigilantes would stoop to working with the rogues. How they were quick to relent into training literal children for combat. How they stopped pulling punches early on.

But he didn’t want there to be any truth to their words. His entire plan banked on the fact that Endwalker and Memoir’s relationship was founded on some genuine level of trust.

“And how exactly would you know that?” he asked, turning to face Orpheus a little more. “Who are you to know *anything* about what’s happening here?”

Orpheus didn’t seem to have an answer to that as their hands stilled, one finger still running over the orange bracelet as gaze fell to the ground. It was an odd reaction, one that Ranboo didn’t really understand.

He should leave now, walk away and pray the rest of the plan works out. Leave before this stranger could sew any more doubt into his already very doubtful heart.

He so desperately wanted this to work, it *had* to work because there were no other options he could morally cope with. And at this point, he was too afraid to find out what morals he’d be willing to throw out the window to protect the friends he has left.

“I know that most of the men in that building used to fight with everything they had to protect others,” Orpheus said, drawing Ranboo’s attention back to them. “And I know every single one of them lost a lot along the way. I know that the media still calls a lot of them vigilantes but they haven’t done anything but serve their own interests in years. I know that they’re killers and you’re not.”

Ranboo’s throat felt tight as he forced himself to answer. “I know they’re killers.”

Orpheus hummed in quiet consideration.

“Then why do you think they’ll help you save the life of one of their greatest enemies?”

He knew how weak the argument would sound even before he said it.

“Because it’s the right thing to do.”

For a brief moment, their eyes met and an understanding seemed to silently pass between them. Whether it was a good thing or a bad thing, Ranboo wasn't sure. But he saw the same bone-deep exhaustion and sadness he'd felt for the whole week since his world started coming apart at the seams reflecting back at him from Orpheus's eyes.

"I hope you're right," they said, breaking the fragile moment as Ranboo looked away.

"Me too," he agreed weakly.

Even as he said it, he could feel his heart breaking under the weight of the stranger's logic.

Endwalker and Memoir were never friends. The man was a rogue and one well known to be ruthless at that, everything he had to offer came at a price. Before that price was being paid by Haywire and his resources, it was a mutually beneficial relationship that the rest of the network reaped the rewards of.

But Haywire was gone, and Endwalker only had one bargaining chip to use with someone like Memoir. And with the way things were going, he only had one contingency that some might even argue was the nuclear option.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, the warmth of his breath inside the mask barely fogging the edges of his goggles.

"So you say can't leave if I'm going in there alone," Ranboo started slowly, "and you say I can't trust them. So what are you actually suggesting I do instead?" He turned to face them fully. "Why should I trust you?"

Orpheus's eyes widened just a bit before their gaze fell back to the ground.

"I know that, all things considered, asking you to trust a complete stranger is a lot right now," they said, gaze drifting back towards the warehouses, "but I promised Crumb that I wouldn't let you do anything stupid without her there to back you up."

Ranboo felt like someone had just tossed him into a snow drift at the mention of her name.

Crumb.

Of course it was Crumb. This is exactly the kind of thing Amnesia used to do to him, corner him when he was about to do something stupid, talk a little sense into him and then immediately offer to help him carry out the stupid plan if she couldn't take him out of it. If he hadn't taken her to that warehouse-- hadn't gotten her *killed* -- he had no doubt it would be her orange and white mask staring up at him in place of this stranger's sad eyes.

But then who was Orpheus to Crumb? How did Amnesia have another young vigilante friend who had never crossed paths with-- wait.

His gaze returned to their orange bracelet as the light caught just right. There was a matching blue and white bracelet peeking out from under their other sleeve.

No.

“You’re a hero student,” he breathed out the realization before he could stop himself. “You knew her as Calico.”

Orpheus shifted their weight as they crossed their arms, not looking at Endwalker as they spoke. “I... I was with her when she...” they didn’t finish the sentence, but they didn’t have to. “I promised her I’d look out for you and Theseus since she and Haywire can’t anymore, so please don’t make me a liar.” Their eyes were burning with a strange intensity when they managed to meet his gaze again. “Let me help you.”

Ranboo felt nauseous as he swallowed and glanced back at the warehouse.

Orpheus wasn’t a vigilante, they shouldn’t be here. Knowing that they were probably a classmate-- a *friend*-- of Crumb and Tubbo’s at Prime Academy should have made him push them away even faster, urging them to avoid getting involved lest they meet a similar fate to any of the others who got into this mess with nothing but blind optimism and the power of friendship.

But he also knew they wouldn’t listen anyway. He could see the stubbornness written into every line of their body under the uncertainty and fear. If he denied them the chance to help in the way he needed them, they would find an even more dangerous way to get involved.

And with the way the plan in his mind was so rapidly changing, he knew he couldn’t deny their help. He still needed a contingency plan in case this all went south.

“Fine,” he said before he could let himself overthink it. “But I’m going to need you to do everything exactly as I tell you, otherwise it could *probably* get all of us killed.”

“A favour?” Memoir said slowly, his expression betraying his alarm and confusion. “Endwalker there are other ways to pay for my services, the *last* thing you should be doing when you’re planning on retiring is offering people favours.”

“Yeah,” Spade pipped in, pushing off of the wall he had been lurking by, “and i thought we drilled it into your head a million times that the last thing you should ever do is offer people favours, your powers are too strong to just be giving free access to, especially people with shifting motives like an *info broker*.”

Memoir’s nose wrinkled at the title. “I’m not an info broker.”

Foolish laughed beside him. “Well, you’re not *not* an info broker.”

Ranboo resisted the urge to sigh in relief as all of the attention was pulled off of him and turned on the bickering rogues.

It hadn’t even been five minutes and he was already thankful to have Orpheus on his side, otherwise, he wouldn’t have been prepared to walk into a room crowded with almost every vigilante *and* rogue in the city.

Memoir, Foolish Gae'meers, Drista, Karl Jacobs, Spade, Chiller, and Slimecicle were the ones he knew, but he also recognized the four others as members of the Amigops. Corpse, Valkyrae, Sykkuno and Toast's presences were both unexpected and unnerving considering that last Ranboo heard they were more like guns for hire, not rogues.

Whatever meeting he had interrupted, the members didn't bode well for an appeal to humanity, so he skipped plan A and went right to plan B by asking for a favour.

A pair of shining green eyes hovered in the corner of his vision but Ranboo steadily ignored them. He hated eye contact on the best of days and Drista's inhuman vibes only made it worse.

"What do you need for the favour?" Drista asked, her voice carrying a little too well through the noise of the others bickering. "It must be significant if you're jumping right to that without asking nicely first."

Ranboo bit the inside of his cheek as everyone's attention turned back on him with an overwhelming range of emotions from apathy to suspicion, to plain curiosity. Too many eyes on him.

"I have two people that need the last day wiped from their memories," Ranboo stated with as much confidence as he could muster. "And I know the usual monetary price for that is well outside of my range, and because of who the people are I know asking nicely won't cut it."

The beat of silence that followed was almost painful as everyone shared silent looks with one another and Memoir frowned at him.

"Interesting," he said eventually. "So who is it that you're so certain I don't like that you'd be willing to put a favour on the table without hesitation?"

Ranboo couldn't stop from laughing nervously, "Oh believe me there was plenty of hesitation," he swallowed nervously, "because it's Dream and Spectre."

If the silence from before his answer was painful, this new one was nothing short of deadly.

Ranboo didn't want to look at Drista, but he couldn't say he liked the reactions when his gaze settled anywhere else.

Foolish and the Amigops just looked pissed at even the mention of Dream's name, while Spade and Chiller's reactions settled into something much colder. Slimecicle looked... concerned if anything, and Memoir and Karl Jacobs were staring at Endwalker like he was a particularly hard puzzle.

It didn't take long for him to run out of other places to look and his gaze eventually settled on Drista.

For once she wasn't wearing a mask, and it left her expression painfully visible. For just a brief second, she looked younger, like the mostly human girl that had been introduced to the

younger vigilantes just a couple of years ago. She looked human and she looked so incredibly conflicted, a million emotions warring for control in her eyes.

Memoir laughed incredulously, drawing Ranboo's attention back to the problem at hand.

"So let me get this straight, Dream and Spectre did something in the last 24 hours that-- and correct me if I'm wrong-- you need them to never tell anyone. And you went through all of the trouble of finding me and the old network to just-- ask me politely to remove the memories? You--" he cut himself off with another laugh and Ranboo grit his teeth to steady himself-- "You expect me to help you capture them alive and only erase a couple of memories? If I ever got my hands on fucking *Dream*--"

"What did they do?" Drista cut in, stopping Memoir before he could finish the thought. "Why-- what changed? He's always been a problem for you but you handled it just fine."

Ranboo resisted the urge to protest that his years of running from Dream while the guy tried to hospitalize him wasn't exactly handling it, but it honestly didn't matter right now. Ranboo's personal feelings had very little to do with handling this situation right now.

He took a measured breath, trying to consider his words and predict their reactions to them and his following arguments before he uttered a word. This was a game of balance and he couldn't risk tipping it any less in his favour when asking a hero's greatest enemies to help spare his life.

Because at the end of the day, no villain would ever hate Dream as much as the Rogues and Vigilantes did, and it was a mistake to let himself forget that fact. Dream was the only hero that made an entire career out of hunting and hurting those that were breaking the law even when they did it to help others.

"Dream and Spectre know Theseus is alive," Ranboo started slowly, his gaze straying back to Drista as he spoke, "and they know who he is, and the heroes that have been helping hide him."

And just as fast as Drista's face had cracked into a vulnerable child, the mask of the cold goddess of chaos returned. And that goddess was *not* happy.

Chiller, surprisingly, was the first to reply. "Endwalker, no offence to you and your... morals or whatever, but if that's true then why the hell didn't you just go and kill them then go back into retirement? You are the most powerful teleporter, probably in the *world*, and your identity is still a total secret, you could have gotten the drop on them and dumped their bodies in the middle of the ocean and no one would ever have known."

Ranboo's stomach flipped at the suggestion because *he knows that*. That was one place where he and the older vigilantes in the network always seemed to disagree. Chiller and Spade were always pushing him to learn more deadly forms of combat, to practice the range of his teleportation further and further into the remote countryside outside the city.

He felt sick because these people were killers, and they always expected that someday Ranboo would just grow up and realize he could be a killer too. Because killing was easy, it

was so much easier than mercy.

But Ranboo wasn't a killer. And he sure as heck wasn't about to admit how close he came to giving into their training tonight. Because Chiller was right, killing them and going back to his normal life *was* the easiest solution.

Though, the way that Drista started glaring daggers into the side of Chiller's head made him feel a little better about his decision.

His throat felt tight as he struggled to come up with any kind of response to Chiller that didn't involve another shouting match about morality, throwing up or having a panic attack. When no easy answers came to him he just shook his head and turned back to Memoir.

"I'm not asking you to help me capture them, I already have them. I just need the favour and then we're out of your hair for good, okay?"

Memoir looked less than pleased with him, but all it took was a brief glance back at Drista for him to school his expression.

"You're going to kill me if I don't help Endwalker, aren't you?" He said, sounding more exhausted than worried by the prospect of his death.

Drista smiled, so sarcastically sweet it looked like poison even from across the room. "Oh, I'm not gonna kill you if you don't fix this, I'm gonna turn you into a hamster and make you watch as I release a ravager in every single one of your warehouses and burn your empire to the ground!" Her smile dropped back into a cold mask of anger. "And if anyone here kills Dream, or somehow screws this up and ruins Theseus's life? I'll think of something much more personal to make up for it."

A white smile mask appeared in her hands and she slipped it over her head, hiding her face behind the same blank smile that always haunted the edges of Ranboo's nightmares.

And when Ranboo blinked she was gone, leaving behind no evidence to prove she had ever been there.

"Lovely girl," Valkyrae commented, "seems like she'd be great at parties with that little psycho act."

"You're one to talk," Corpse replied, almost making Ranboo jump at the strange timbre of his voice.

"And what's that supposed to mean--"

The sudden bickering and laughter from both the Amigops and others chiming in weren't enough to distract Ranboo from the fact that Karl Jacobs and Toast were both whispering in Memoir's ear. They were being subtle, and definitely too quiet to hear what they were discussing, but he didn't miss the way all three of them were throwing him strange looks.

He hated to agree with someone he just met, but Orpheus was right.

He couldn't trust these people.

"What is this?" Dream hissed as he pulled against the zip-ties and duct tape keeping him restrained against the metal folding chair. "Hemlock you fucking traitor don't think I don't see you back there, what is this?"

Ranboo watched Hemlock from the corner of his eye as she pursed her lips. She sighed, tucking a strand of her long black hair behind her shoulder as one of her white cat ears flicked. "It's a favour repaid," she answered, dark eyes sliding to look at Nix. "And the right thing to do."

"The right thing to do?" Dream snarled, jerking against his restraints again. "You think siding with rogues and kidnapping two of your own teammates is the right thing to do? Do you know how many laws this is breaking? How is that the right thing to do?"

Hemlock rolled her eyes as many of the others in the room scoffed at the hero's blatant hypocrisy. "Right because when you break the law, kill a guy and hide his body in the woods it's fine, but when I team up with some vigilantes to save your life *I'm* the bad guy."

Dream stilled at her words. "Save my life? How exactly does kidnapping me and handing me over to villains constitute saving my life?"

"Because we're not villains!" Memoir called out cheerily as he approached, two circular metal tins tucked under one arm. His dress shoes clicked decisively on the concrete floors as he crossed the space to the antique film projector that had been set up directly in front of the chairs holding Dream and Spectre in place. "Well, most of us anyway. Plus, to my understanding, if it weren't for Nix and Hemlock, that ambush they kidnapped you in would have just been an assassination, so really, you should be thanking her."

Ranboo pretended not to feel Hemlock's gaze burning a hole in the side of his head at that revelation. She had been a pretty good sport on the "no questions asked" part of Nix's favour, so he doubted she was aware of the fact Endwalker would have been the assassin without her and Nix stepping in.

He didn't even bother acknowledging the half-hearted glares almost everyone else was throwing his way, no doubt still disappointed Endwalker never followed through.

"And why, exactly, would I have a would-be assassin that could be called off by you kidnapping me instead?" Dream challenged, stubborn as ever.

"Because you, you dogshit of a human being," Memoir started airily, "found out the identity of a retired teenage vigilante. And anyone with half a brain knows that even though Theseus was a good person who deserves to live a nice, quiet life after everything he's been through, you'd still rat him out in a heartbeat. And the two options to shut you up were putting a bullet through your fucking head, or erasing the memories of said identity. So you can say thank you to Drista and Endwalker for saving your life, actually."

Dream stilled for a long beat and didn't move until Memoir had moved on to fiddling around with the projector. When he did move, it was an almost sinister, slow tilt of his head in Ranboo's direction despite the fact he was almost directly behind the hero.

"You don't honestly believe this will protect you, do you, *Ranboo*?" Dream said evenly. "Protecting *Theseus* won't change the fact that I was already on to you. All it took was one other identity for me to figure it out this time, what makes you think I can't do it again?"

It took a lot of self-control to ignore the wave of nausea that tried to crash over him at the tone in Dream's voice. It reminded him of broken bones and dark nights running from the man.

This time he couldn't help but glance at Hemlock when she turned to stare at him. It was not her look of smothered rage from before, but almost...concern he was met with. The corners of her mouth downturned ever so slightly and her brows furrowed as she glanced between Nix and Endwalker, obviously making the connection between their identities.

Dream had a point though, after crossing paths in the nether Ranboo had worried about the safety of his identity, especially after he saved Techno. What *was* he going to do after this? How long could he last in the hero program before he crossed paths with Dream again and the man recognized him?

"Don't let him get in your head kid," Slimecicle said, stepping up beside Ranboo and bumping him lightly with his shoulder. "You've thought this through enough, don't sweat the small stuff before you have to."

The corners of his eyes creased with a smile hidden behind his mask and ranboo managed a small nod of acknowledgement. Even if Dream did have a point, Slime was right, the hero was just trying to get under his skin.

It also made him realize it was probably a bad sign for the way this night could go that everyone seemed to either pity him, or straight up hate him.

In front of them, Dream scoffed and turned to look forward again. "Let's just get this over with, I wanna go home and take a fucking nap."

"Oh thank the gods," Spectre sighed, sounding relieved. "I'm glad we can at least agree on that."

"What do you mean 'at least'," Dream snapped. "You're the one that's been disagreeing with me all night even though I saved your fucking *life* earlier."

"You didn't *save* me. If Theseus hadn't been there we'd both be dead right now and you know it. Yet somehow that's not enough to at least owe the kid some common decency and let him go so now we're here. Because you're such a massive prick, not because I'm disagreeable."

"Shut up idiot," Dream grumbled, "this is not my fault."

“It literally is, but okay.”

Memoir sighed as he turned away from the projector to stare at their captives. “You assholes done yet? Because I have more important shit to do than listen to your lover's quarrel.”

Both heroes started to immediately protest, making the sight of Nix, Hemlock, Spade and Chiller all barely holding back laughter all the more amusing. Not that Ranboo could really find it in himself to smile at the moment, not with the way his stomach was still twisting in knots and the beginnings of a stress headache haunting the corners of his mind.

The uproar didn't last long after Memoir rolled the projector forward, stopping by Dream's side.

Ranboo's hand clenched at his side as he eyed the white sheet that had been draped between two of the large shelves surrounding the small open space they were situated in. In all the time he had known Memoir, he had never seen the man's powers in action. He was usually very secretive and kicked people out whenever he needed to use them.

“You need anyone else to leave for this Memoir?” Spade asked, glancing at Endwalker, Nix and Hemlock.

Memoir looked up, studying them for a beat before shaking his head. “No, I'm sure the Amigops can handle patrolling the area on their own. And I asked them all here,” he nodded his head towards Nix and Hemlock, “why would I want them to leave when the party's just starting?”

If Memoir demanding he bring the heroes who were helping him contain Dream and Spectre hadn't felt like a trap before, it definitely did now. Especially with the villains probably guarding all the exits from the outside.

“Does it need to be projected? Or is this just for the audience's benefit?” Hemlock asked, head tilted curiously. She seemed... mostly unbothered by the fact that this was obviously a trap. But then again she seemed like a generally unbothered person, so it was hard to tell.

“Memories are a tricky thing to deal with,” Memoir answered as he flicked a switch that lit up the projector. “It's harder to get lost when I can see a physical version of what I'm doing, hence the film reel method.”

“Are there other methods?” Nix asked, speaking for the first time since Endwalker brought her here.

Memoir's eyes narrowed ever so slightly at her. “Just sit back and enjoy the show, *heroes*.”

He flicked another switch and the sound of the projector's motor whirred to life, the blank film passing through it and spooling onto another empty reel. One of Memoir's hands came to rest over the moving strip of film, one finger barely resting against its surface as the other hand curled around Dream's jaw, fingers clenching the man's face with probably a little more force than necessary. The hero couldn't even manage a full word of protest before he stilled and a picture flicked to life on the sheet.

It was like a silent film from a first-person point of view, sitting in the passenger seat of a car and glancing between the road and the pink haired driver, who was none other than Techno Watson.

Luckily the memory was not playing out in real time, but at seemingly 2 or three times the speed. At certain points, it was hard to understand what was happening without the sound, but it was enough to get the gist of it.

Dream and Techno were looking for someone. Early on they spoke to Wilbur outside a building surrounded by police vans and firetrucks before spending what was probably hours running through the city following messages from Dream's phone. Everyone watching occasionally had comments or questions, leading to smaller discussions, but for the most part, it was silent.

"Who does it say he's getting texts from?" Spectre asked at one point, earning more than a few surprised looks. "I can't catch the name."

"They're from Quackity," Hemlock answered immediately. "But my question is how did Quackity know where to find you?"

Spectre was quiet for a minute, eyes glued to the screen just as Dream and Blade rounded the corner of an alley and froze at the sight of a hooded, masked figure across the street from them.

"He didn't," Spectre replied, eyes still glued to the screen. "Quackity is dead, those messages were part of a trap."

"Quackity's... are you sure?"

On the screen, Tommy decked out in a lot of the missing gear from the safehouse and the missing Endwalker jacket, nodded at The Blade and Dream before running past them unopposed. Dream and Blade ran in the direction Theseus had just run from, revealing Spectre fighting a man draped head to toe in black, a ski mask hiding most of his face as well.

"I'm sure," Spectre replied, voice cold as stone.

Ranboo shifted his feet as something uncomfortable settled in his chest. He had no idea who Quackity was but based on the grim reactions from the heroes and even the ex-heroes in the room, he was probably one of them.

The rest of Dream's memories played out in absolute silence.

The man in the Ski mask was controlling the heroes, that much was obvious when the first brawl abruptly ended and the colours of the memory took on a pink tint.

It was... it was hard to watch Tommy in such a one-sided fight. Ranboo had never seen videos of Theseus fighting on his own, he only ever got to witness an unfair fight moments before Endwalker stepped in to even the odds. Having to sit and watch helplessly as Tommy

took brutal hits that had already happened was more than a little distressing. If the tension in the room was anything to go by, many of the other vigilantes seemed to agree.

It was hard to keep track of what was actually happening from Dream's point of view. They switched opponents so quickly and when the pink tint of the villain's powers vanished Dream went from beating Theseus to saving Spectre from the villain without missing a beat.

Ranboo wished it was harder to understand what happened when Tommy got his hands on a gun, but it was painfully clear even in silence.

Everyone flinched when Techno, also now unmasked, dove for Tommy when he turned the weapon on himself. Ranboo looked away.

Tommy was fine. He knew Tommy was fine because Techno saved him and was still with him in hiding, protecting him.

Tommy was fine. He was probably super injured from taking on three pro heroes and a villain by himself, and he tried to kill himself, but other than that he was fine.

This was fine. Totally fine and great and once they were done here Ranboo could find Tommy and then they'd start figuring out how to get Tubbo back and kick Schlatts butt and—

All good. Yep.

He didn't even realize the projector had stopped until a hand landed on his shoulder, making him look up again.

"Hey kid, you good?" Slime asked, brows pinched with concern.

Ranboo opened his mouth to reply before realizing he wasn't even sure how to respond to that. Instead of answering he watched as Memoir pulled the now physical copy of Dreams memories from the projector and placed it in a silver tin the size of the film reel.

"I'm just peachy," Ranboo settled on, gaze drifting to Dreams' now unconscious form slumped in the chair.

On his other side, a small hand wrapped around his and gave a reassuring squeeze, drawing his attention to Nix's sad smile.

"It's gonna be okay," she said, giving his hand another squeeze. "He'll be okay."

Ranboo swallowed around the dryness in his throat. Eventually, he nodded when no reply came to him.

The process of turning Spectre's memories into a physical tape was much the same, as were the recordings playing out on the screen itself.

That was until it wasn't.

The tape containing all his memories from when the villain in the ski mask started controlling him up until just now in the warehouse ended with little fanfare, and some of the tightness in Ranboo's chest started to uncoil.

Then, without another word, Memoir got out a third tape.

"What are you doing?" Hemlock asked, squinting at Memoir as the rogue set up the third tape. "All Endwalker asked was for the memories you've already removed."

"Yes," Memoir agreed. "But mister Spectre here has something else I need, and I figured I'd just cash in one of my favours with Endwalker now and take it while I still have him here."

Ranboo felt like the wind had been suddenly knocked out of him.

"One of... no this-- that's not the agreement--" he started to argue only to be cut off.

"A favour for a favour, right?" Memoir said looking up at him with an unreadable look in his eyes. "This isn't one favour, each memory is a favour, so now instead of owing me two, you just owe me one." He smiled, but the expression was cold. "You're welcome."

His hand touched the side of Spectre's head again and the video flickered to life on the makeshift screen.

At first, Ranboo didn't watch as he was too distracted by Hemlock and Nix. Hemlock looked like she wanted to protest, even taking a step forward only for Nix to catch her arm and give her a pointed look of warning.

This was the trap, this was why it was a balancing act to work with someone like Memoir.

Ranboo watched their silent exchange, Hemlock was obviously unhappy with the turn of events and Nix trying to convince her to back down. They all knew going into this that there would undoubtedly be compromises but this? This was practically a robbery and all of them knew it. But unless they were willing to start a fight while outnumbered ten to three *and* protect Dream and Spectre while they were unconscious, there was nothing to be done.

Hemlock seemed to accept it begrudgingly and she stepped back and shrugged off Nix's hand. It was far from ideal but they weren't prepared for a fight like this tonight.

Then his attention returned to the memory that Memoir was stealing and only felt more confused than ever.

It was the very end of a fight that was hard to keep track of as the perspective was constantly obscured by rushing water or bubbles and long dark hair blocking the light whenever Spectre got dragged under. Then he was out of the water and staring across a rushing section of the underground river at four people on the opposite side.

Ranboo recognized CPK and Tycoon easily, but the boy in the skull mask behind them and the unconscious girl in a stained blue costume and white cloak were unfamiliar. Probably interns if he had to guess. CPK and Tycoon seemed to be arguing as the boy behind them leaned down to scoop something off the floor.

A flash of orange caught Ranboo's eye and the rest of the video was momentarily forgotten.

It was the same orange and white pattern as the bracelets Orpheus was wearing, and it matched the red and black one the intern was wearing on his wrist. His eyes flicked back to the unconscious intern to confirm his suspicion as he spotted the same blue and white bracelet on her wrist.

The girl in the memory was Orpheus's hero persona.

And the villains that came into view as the ones attacking them were none other than the Amigops. Tycoon took the interns and fled, Sykkuno giving chase just before something dark covered Spectre's head and view of the fight.

There was a good few minutes of confusing darkness as Spectre's head was in a bag, and it gave Ranboo's nerves way too much time to chase themselves in circles about the fact that he left Orpheus alone outside with the same villains that already almost killed them once.

That was-- not good. Very not good actually.

It was actually very bad.

And unless he wanted to start something he doubted they could finish, there was nothing he could do right now but pray to all the gods that Orpheus actually stayed put and ran if they got the signal like they promised they would.

In the memory, the bag eventually shifted enough that Spectre could see his feet and a majority of the floors of the tunnels, making it easy enough to track when they actually turned left or right despite the villains turning him around or doubling back a few times.

Ranboo had heard about Spectre's kidnapping, it happened the same night that Amnesia-- the night Haywire was taken. Not a lot of information about it was made public because it was still an ongoing investigation, but he knew this must be that very kidnapping.

But why did Memoir want this memory?

Memoir was obviously already working with the Amigops, so it wasn't like he needed the location if they already knew it. Why would he want to make sure Spectre couldn't remember where they had taken him?

The dark water and red vine-covered tunnels eventually transitioned into doorways and smooth concrete floors and tile walls until they stopped and the bag was removed.

Ranboo wanted to throw up at the scene that played out next, because not only was it a map directly to Schlatt, but it was a map to where he was keeping Tubbo.

He didn't understand any of what happened next. Tubbo was on the floor, his face bruised and covered in dried blood. He was sitting next to the corpse of another Dream Agency hero, Ace.

The same villain that had been controlling Blade Dream and Spectre to attack Tommy was also there. Schlatt was yelling, and Tubbo was cowering. Schlatt had a gun and then-- The memories after that didn't make any sense, because Schlatt had shot Spectre, but then Spectre was alive and-- it didn't make any sense.

It didn't make sense why Memoir and the vigilantes would take this information away from the heroes. Spectre had information that could be instrumental to taking Schlatt down but the rogues were stopping that from happening.

Memoir had a direct map to Tubbo.

Oh.

It was a direct map to Haywire.

The video of the memory ended and when he looked over Nix and Hemlock were both pale. Ranboo couldn't describe the kind of guilt that was worming its way into his heart, because he knew Memoir wasn't just going to take that map from Spectre and let Nix and Hemlock just walk away with it.

Memoir silently changed out the tape and turned to Endwalker and the heroes.

"Why?" Ranboo asked, suddenly desperate to stall. He couldn't believe he let them walk into this, he should have just taken Dream and Spectre here without backup instead of risking Nix and Hemlock. "Why are you stopping the heroes from finding Schlatt?"

Memoir sighed, giving Ranboo an almost apologetic look. "I'm not stopping them from finding Schlatt," he said, "I'm stopping them from finding Haywire."

Ranboo's stomach flipped as he slowly stepped in front of Nix. "Why?"

Memoir almost looked pained and he closed his eyes and shook his head. "Gods this is why I don't like working with kids." He pursed his lips, eyes narrowing on Ranboo. "I can't allow the heroes to get their hands on the resources that Haywire has to offer, it's not personal, just business."

Ranboo swallowed nervously as everyone started to slowly back away from him and the heroes, Chiller stepping up next to Memoir.

"You don't have the kind of manpower it would take to rescue him, even with the Amigop's help, you know that," Ranboo tried to reason, even when he knew it was already lost. He just couldn't admit it yet.

"You're right," Memoir agreed, jaw clenching as he paused. "But we don't need to get him out to make sure he's out of the picture. And kid, I really am sorry to say this but--"

Chiller raised his hands, the water tank on his back powering up and he prepared to use his ice powers.

Ranboo already knew this was coming. This was why he needed a contingency plan, because these people were killers, and he couldn't trust them.

His hand slowly closed around the flash grenade on the back of his belt.

--I can't let the heroes get their hands on the resources your powers have to offer either."

A jet-powered spray of freezing water rocketed straight at Endwalker but he didn't move, trusting Nix to have his back as he pulled the pin on the grenade and threw it high enough to light up the windows that Orpheus could see from their lookout spot.

Hopefully, everything from here could still go according to the plan.

Chapter End Notes

not gonna lie this is one of those chapters that makes me feel like the worst kind of overwriter but it's fiiiiine.

the next chapter should pick up right where this left off but no promises for how soon that will be, my motivation is almost as rare as the fluff in this fic.

Leave a kudos and comment if you've made it this far, I too understand the need to keyboard smash into the void sometimes.

Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Aimsey follows the plan, until Ranboo is forced to change it.

Chapter Notes

Haha wow, only four chapters this year? My bad guys. But look it's not dead yet have a chapter <3

Happy (very late) two years to this fic and Happy New Year's Eve!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Aimsey saw the signal.

They saw the signal, the bright flash of light in the high windows of the warehouse from Endwalker's flash grenade, but Aimsey hesitated.

If Aimsey did this, the hero and police forces would crash down on this warehouse and everyone inside with an unforgiving prejudice for just the chance to lock up as many of the wanted criminals hiding within for good. One of those wanted criminals was Endwalker himself.

Endwalker, whom Aimsey promised they would protect from doing something stupid. Endwalker, who made them promise that if they lit the signal for Aimsey to call in the heroes, they would run and be long gone before any sign of trouble. Endwalker, who had been a vigilante just as long as Aimsey had been in school to learn how to be a hero and whose field experience far outstripped their own.

Aimsey should trust his judgement on this plan. They didn't want to but they would have to to save lives tonight.

No one else dies.

Theoretically easier said than done, considering the second thing that had them hesitating to make a call to the emergency hotline as they promised they would. The real question was could Aimsey make the call and manage to slip away before Corpse and Sykkuno caught up to them?

That was not part of the original plan, but Aimsey didn't even need to see to recognize the timbre of Corpse's enhanced voice even through his mask. They could hear their steps clearly as both villains stepped outside which did not bode well for their own chances of staying hidden. Aimsey's rabbit-like ears were pressed down under a hood, beanie and their long hair and they could hear the villains just fine. That meant that Corpse, whom they last saw didn't wear a hood or hat of any kind with his gear, would have an even easier time hearing Aimsey should they move.

But if they were going to make the call, and make sure the villains couldn't warn the others still in the warehouse, Aimsey needed to *move*.

Gunfire, sounds like thick glass shattering, clattering of metal and shouting erupted from the warehouse, adding to Aimsey's sense of urgency. Best case scenario it was five on, what? Seven? Worse case and more likely Endwalker would be lucky to still have Nix and Hemlock on his side and there could still be more members of the Amigops already there or making their way in.

"Sounds like my cue to head back in," Sykkuno said almost lazily, boots scuffing as he pivoted back towards the door.

That would be Aimsey's best shot, using Sykkuno's movement to cover the sound of their own as they shifted their couch into a more ready position.

Corpse murmured something affirmative and the door creaked, the sound of splashing water and one very distinct voice shrieking curses spilled out from inside but Aimsey barely had time to register anything beyond that as they took off and the loudest sounds suddenly became the pounding of shoes against concrete and racing of their heart in their ears.

Aimsey absently hit the call button on the phone, the number for the crisis hotline had been ready to go before Endwalker had even left the roof. They put it on speaker after they leapt to the next roof, knowing that their feet wrapping against the sheet metal of this particular roof would throw stealth out the window.

Hopefully, Corpse either got dragged into the mess in the warehouse or was far enough behind that they could finish the call before he caught up. Though Aimsey didn't hear anything pursuing them yet, they did not doubt that he *would* catch up if he had the mind to.

"Hello, you've reached the Major Emergent Crisis hotline, press one if you need to speak to an operator—"

Aimsey nearly growled in frustration as they skidded to a stop before the caged access ladder at the edge of the metal roof. They jammed a finger against the number pad before promptly ignoring the locked grate over the top of the ladder and swinging themselves along the outside of the cage.

It took longer than they would have liked to find their footing on the unguarded lower rungs of the access ladder but they couldn't risk dropping the phone by freeing their other hand. Every second counted now as they could distantly hear boots thumping on the rooftops a few buildings over.

“MEC hotline, what’s your emergency?” a calm and collected operator said, voice made tinny by the crappy speakers of the burner phone.

Aimsey decided sparing the final five seconds to get down the ladder without spraining anything was worth a delayed answer, so the operator was halfway through repeating the question when Aimsey’s feet hit the ground and they flat-out sprinted towards the maze of the shipping yard in the distance.

When the operator started to repeat the question for a third time, Aimsey cut them off with the answer.

“Off-duty hero emergency clearance *Alpha-Two-Five-Three* dash *Charlie-Sierra-One*,” Aimsey wheezed out, hoping that Captain Sparklez wouldn’t mind that they got his clearance codes from his deceased intern. Not that a guy in a medical coma could mind much of anything but still he’d be in trouble for the security breach when he woke up. “There is a situation unfolding in the industrial district. Lot 2234, warehouse nine, bay two. Dream, Hemlock and Nix found Spectre and he’s being held in one of Memoir’s warehouses by around ten assailants. Dream and Spectre are down, requesting immediate backup—”

Something heavy slammed into Aimsey from behind, knocking them to the ground and sending the phone skittering across the pavement.

It was only muscle memory from painfully repetitive training regiments that had Aimsey arching up and throwing the weight of the person over them before the assailant could settle in a better position to fully pin them. A figure clad in black tipped forward into their line of sight and Aimsey scrambled out from under their attacker, silently thanking every awful practice drill they ever had to do in classes over the years.

Undeterred by Aimsey’s quick reaction the assailant whipped around with the flash of silver blades in hand under the dim light of the city’s night sky. Aimsey quickly placed the face of the villain Toast, wreathed in shadow and a blanket of cold calm. One of his hands pulled back, throwing the knife balanced delicately between his fingers and Aimsey did both the dumbest and only thing they could think of: they lunged at him.

Caught off guard and not wanting an unknown opponent within striking range, the villain rolled out of the way and Aimsey internally cheered. They clumsily turned the feinted lunge into a dive roll and ended up on their feet right next to the phone where the operator was speaking indistinctly, probably asking for clarification.

Knowing the ruse was up before it even really had a chance to catch, Aimsey snatched the phone back up and broke back into a run, changing course for the decently well-lit parking lot not far from the service road that led into the district.

“Industrial district, lot 2234, warehouse nine, bay two!” Aimsey repeated with more urgency, heaving for breath.

The voice of a random spirit rang in their head, shouting at Aimsey to duck. They managed to do so just in time to see the silver knife go flying overhead.

“Request for immediate response taskforce! Assailants are all villains, rogues and vigilantes, highly armed and extremely dangerous!”

Another flash of black fabric and silver metal ahead of them and another spirit shouted for Aimsey to go left. They barely twisted out of the way of the oncoming knife and stumbled onto a sidewalk lined with street lamps. Toast melted back into the shadows before Aimsey could even properly place where the attack had come from and they grunted, fear and frustration mounting.

This plan had been made under the assumption that no one knew Endwalker had any other allies lurking around and never would. They were supposed to have the necessary time to convince the person on the other end of the MEC line that this wasn't a joke and the four heroes did really need help. The whole point was that the judicial forces reigning down on the warehouse would have the element of surprise and Aimsey's identity and life would never truly be at risk.

“No plan survives first contact with the enemy,” a Tactics and Planning I instructor had quoted at some point in their first year at Prime. “You must learn to be flexible and adaptable because no one you face is going to give you the time to sit and make a new plan. Remember your goals and forget about anything but how to achieve them.”

Aimsey had a few short and straightforward goals that came to mind in the form of a small mental bullet list with no particular order.

- Don't die
- Don't go to jail
- Don't let anyone else die
- Keep the villains from escaping

Don't die was a given and they were already doing their best to achieve it, so don't go to jail and keep the villains from escaping came to mind next.

The MEC operator was speaking again and Aimsey only caught a flash of their words through the pounding of their own heart and the shouted warnings from ghosts that kept narrowly saving their life.

“—emergency clearance code accepted but we need the name and rank of the hero it belongs to to confirm—”

Behind you!

Aimsey whipped around, lashing out with a kick that was easily caught and used to throw them to the ground with enough force to knock the air from their lungs. Aimsey kept a white-knuckled grip on the phone as the villain tried to lean in and snatch it. They kicked his free hand away while fighting to get air back in their lungs.

“Don't you dare—” Toast started to snarl before their red Converse connected with his face, cutting him off with a gurgling cry of pain and adding a new splash of red to the faded white laces of Aimsey's shoe.

“Pro-Level Hero, Captain Sparklez,” Aimsey wheezed, managing to press the foot of their trapped leg against Toast’s chest and force him further away and he started spilling bloodied curses through his split lip and broken nose. “ *Alpha-Two-Five-Three* dash—” the silver flash of another knife wasn’t spotted fast enough for them to try pulling away and they nearly screamed as it cut through the worn leg of their cargo pants and the skin underneath alike— “ *Charlie-Sierra-One*, ” they finished through gritted teeth.

Suddenly the goal of not dying shot back up to the top of the list.

More to themselves than anyone else Aimsey practically shouted, “I am *not* dying today!”

Aimsey reached deep down for the chord of power that rested so far beneath their rib cage that most days it may as well have not even existed. Mentally unburying the thread that connected to their power, their *real* power, not their magic abilities, almost immediately sparked a headache but it was well worth it to see the surprise on the villain's face as he was thrown back by a flash of red light between them.

He landed hard in the centre of a pool of light cast from the lamps overhead and didn’t manage to scramble much farther when Aimsey shot to their feet and pressed the advantage, wrapping him up in the burning red energy of their telekinesis and pinning him there.

It wouldn’t last, Aimsey’s powers weren’t that strong and if they tried to rely on it for too long the headache would become an incapacitating migraine, which would be very bad given, well *everything* .

“—*still there?*” the operator sounded more than a little panicked now, probably having heard very little from Aimsey’s end but the scuffling of fighting and cursing. “*Can anyone still hear me? Help is on the way just stay on the line so we can track your precise location—*”

Aimsey grimaced at that. The heroes and police finding their exact location wouldn’t do if they wanted to achieve their goal of *staying out of jail*.

“Just send them to the warehouse, I’ll be fine,” Aimsey tried their best to reassure the poor woman on the other end of the line. It probably didn’t help much considering the next thing Aimsey did was hang up.

It took an awkwardly long time, trying to split their attention between the phone and keeping Toast pinned, but they eventually managed to power the device down before throwing it to the ground. Aimsey then stomped on it until little cracked motherboards and wires were spilling out onto the ground and breaking up the little pile of sparkling glass shards.

They stared at the remains of the device for a moment longer before dragging their gaze up to meet the villain's dark, calculating eyes. Aimsey swallowed, their desperation and aggravation fading slightly as their adrenaline dropped and they tried not to feel nervous.

Now came the hard part: keeping the villains from escaping.

Ranboo, being who he is and what he'd trained to do for the last few years as a vigilante, was good at games like three card monte. For all that Haywire had always been the tactician of their operation Endwalker could not afford to be a slouch when it came to strategy or keeping track of players on the field.

Playing three card monte with the three tape reels Memoir made while everyone was trying to kill him was, unsurprisingly, a lot harder than just normal three card monte or keeping track of combatants on a battlefield alone. But he was managing.

He was managing because he had to manage.

Everything was going fine and great. He set off the signal, Orpheus would call in backup that could hopefully be here within the next ten to twenty minutes. Nix and Hemlock made an exceptional pair in a fight, Nix keeping most of their opponents at bay and defending Dream and Spectre's unconscious forms with whipping currents of water dancing through the air while Hemlock made quick work of anyone stupid enough to get within striking range of her poison tipped claws.

Valkyrae was the first to fall to Helmock's paralysis, quickly followed by Spade, but neither of them was as big of a threat as Chiller, who was the only one making any headway against Nix's waterspouts as he froze huge chunks of the water and flung it back at the two heroes. He was doing his best to corner them against a tall shelving unit so there were fewer directions to dodge Sykkuno's knives and bullets, but Nix wasn't backing down without a fight.

None of that was Ranboo's problem, however. Ranboo *had* to get the tape that held the map to Haywire. Frankly, he didn't want them to keep any of the tapes but between Karl Jacobs, Memoir and Slime every time he got his hands on two of the tapes one of them would pull out a big flashy *something* to knock him off balance and somehow he lost both tapes every time.

He was ninety percent sure Slime had the tape he wanted but he didn't let on, instead going for Memoir with his claws out and forcing one of the other two to step in to defend the rogue.

Memoir's powers would be a one-touch knockout, but only if he could manage skin-to-skin contact, which, with the layers and layers of gear Endwalker wore, was gonna be one hell of a task. Especially considering one of Endwalker's most common sparring partners was Theseus, who was much faster than Memoir and just as likely to lead with his hands in an all-out brawl like this.

It was predictably Slime that jumped to Memoir's defence, giving Ranboo exactly what he wanted.

He didn't follow through on his feint towards Memoir and instead tackled Slimecicle to the floor, managing to throw off Memoir's balance along with them. He ripped the tin from

Slime's hands and didn't hold back his weight as he stepped on both of the shorter men to dive for the second tape that had been knocked from Memoir's hands.

A pained grunt and a curse followed in his wake as his fingers curled around the second tape. This time he didn't give Karl the chance to catch up, now actively avoiding letting the rogue use his powers to reverse the tide of time back to their favour.

Ranboo vanished in a burst of purple particles, hardly even thinking of a destination until his feet hit unfinished concrete floors.

He couldn't stay away for long, he was painfully aware of that, but his brain momentarily short-circuited as he took in his surroundings and recognized the equipment storage room in his high school gym.

Black metal shelves (the same brand as those in Memoir's warehouse he noted absently) lined one wall stacked high with rolled yoga mats, bins of colourful pennies, wiffle balls, battered lacrosse sticks, baseballs, and gloves. There was a rack of bats against the back wall and bins of volleyballs, basketballs—

It was so wrong, standing in his vigilante gear in the middle of such a mundane place. It occurred to him that after tonight, this very well may be either the last time he ever wore this vigilante gear or the last time he got to stand in this room. Everything was about to change, and his chest ached as he realized he was just going to have to live with it no matter how it played out.

Maybe next year he could finally make the varsity volleyball team, no longer losing so many hours of much-needed sleep to whatever the heck his nightlife had become.

But here was as good a place as any to hide the tapes. Hopefully, he hadn't stalled too long, but just in case he rushed, using one of the shelves as a step so he could lift a ceiling tile and slip the tapes into the back corner.

This time he had to take a moment to focus before teleporting and with another rush of his power he was standing back in the warehouse, hidden in the shadow of one of the same towering shelving units as he assessed what had changed in his absence.

Apparently, and unfortunately, the tide had turned against Nix and Hemlock once Endwalker disappeared and left them with an extra three enemies whom he was no longer distracting. Nix was on her knees, both her arms somehow fully encased in large hunks of ice that seemed to weigh her down if the visible strain they put on her limbs was anything to go by. The villain Sykkuno stood over her, gun trained lazily but no less dangerously on the back of her head.

Hemlock, somehow, seemed to have gotten the even worse end of the deal as she was pressed flat to the floor, Foolish Gae'meer's heavy boots pinned her hands against her back and his trident pressed dangerously against the back of her neck to discourage her from even attempting to move.

Everyone was breathing heavily, leaving the open space of the room almost eerily silent compared to the fighting that had filled the space in every way when Ranboo had left. He got the feeling no one had noticed him yet, so he quietly slinked deeper into the shadows to observe. If the rogues wanted the heroes dead, the heroes would be dead already.

Not that it did much to ease the yawning pit of anxiety in his stomach.

Memoir sighed, running a hand through his hair as he stepped away from Karl and moved towards the bulk of his allies across the room, guarding the four fallen heroes. “Hemlock, if you would be so kind as to release Valkyrae, Spade and Chiller?” he asked calmly, earning an irritated growl from the woman in question.

“You wanna reconsider that?” Foolish asked, all traces of the usually relaxed goofball he presented himself as around Endwalker eerily absent as he pressed a little harder against his trident.

Hemlock said nothing but the villain and ex-heroes quickly pushed to their feet as she released her hold over them.

“Thank you my dear,” Memoir said before turning his gaze to Sykkuno. “Any word back from Corpse and Toast?”

“Corpse confirmed there was another outside but nothing back from either of them yet.”

Memoir hummed, drumming his fingers over the final tape reel tin clutched in his left hand. He just shook his head slightly and turned to make his way towards Hemlock and Foolish. It was only when he dropped to his knees next to the prone hero and opened the tin that Ranboo realized it was not the same tape Karl had managed to hold onto, it was a new one.

Ranboo’s gaze darted back to Karl and Slimecicle, both still hanging back from the main cluster of rogues and villains. Ranboo wouldn’t allow himself to consider any of them vigilantes after what happened tonight, they weren’t fighting for anyone but themselves anymore.

Though he couldn’t see it, he could hear the nervous tapping of nails on aluminum. From the way Karl was standing, Ranboo figured the man was clutching the actual third tape against his chest as he watched the scene play out from a distance.

Memoir sighed again, turning the tape over in his hands for a moment. “Honestly, maybe the kid had the right idea, four dead heroes ain’t worth it. So how about I just take what I need from you and Nix here and then send the two of you and Spectre on your merry way? You’re good people, I’m not usually in the business of depriving this city of good people if it can be avoided.”

“And Dream?” Hemlock managed, sounding a little strangled between Foolish’s weight pressing down on her back and the way her face was smooshed against the floor. “And Endwalker?”

“Dream isn’t any of your concern anymore, and like I said I don’t deprive the city of *good* people,” he replied airily. “Endwalker just needs a little... course correction. Throwing his entire life away just to maintain his morality on principle? It’s stupid and futile. There’s no wisdom in trying to save the lives of the people who want nothing but to see you suffer.”

“If you think that’s why he did what he did tonight, then you don’t know him as well as you think you do,” Nix snapped, glaring daggers into the side of the man’s head.

Memoir shrugged, unsympathetic to the burning passion in her gaze. “Maybe not, but kids gotta learn one way or another.” His hand closed around the tape in his hand and his other rested on the side of Hemlock’s face as he activated his powers even without the help of the projector for guidance.

Ranboo’s stomach flipped but he didn’t move to stop it. Frankly, Hemlock losing her memory of this was a good thing for him in the long run and while he felt a little guilty just standing by it wasn’t enough to make him give the game away so easily. He had at least a *little* self-preservation left somewhere in the swiss cheese of flawed logic that somehow led him to this course of action.

He then wondered if it would really be all that bad to just leave Dream to whatever fate Memoir had planned, and *that* guilt was both stronger and coupled with the fear of retribution from Drista. His eyes strayed back to Slimecicle and Karl, knowing whatever he was going to do, he would have to do it before Memoir moved on to taking Nix’s memories.

The room was made slightly less silent as a few murmured conversations started up while they waited for Memoir to finish. Ranboo slowly crouched lower as some of the rogue’s not guarding Nix and Hemlock started stretching and moving about, muttering complaints about pulled muscles and bruised ribs. One of his hands came up to rest against the support beam on the shelf he was hiding next to but he paused when instead of meeting thin black steel, like the shelves in the gym storage, his hand brushed something thicker.

Slowly pulling his eyes away from Slime and Karl, he inspected the rectangular box affixed to the inner corner of the beam and immediately froze when he recognized what it was. When he recognized the *explosive charge* Ranboo just accidentally rested his hand against.

His eyes darted around, taking in as many of the shelving units as he could see in the unlit parts of the warehouse and quickly realized every single beam had a charge painted the same black as the shelves fixed in the same place.

Holy *shit*.

Sykkuno and Memoir had just been firing *guns* in here.

These guys were actually clinically insane. Like, Ranboo knew that but *really*? This kind of firepower would level a lot more than just this warehouse if it went off.

Heart once again feeling like it was trying to beat out of his chest for an entirely new set of reasons, Ranboo flicked his attention back towards Memoir as the man rose to his feet,

closing the new tape in its same plain silver tin. Then his gaze shot back to Karl and Slime only to be met with a piercing pair of green eyes watching him.

Slime and Ranboo stare at each other for a beat, neither of them moving or even daring to breathe in Ranboo's case. Then Slime just shook his head minutely, a warning and a plea all at once from the pained pinch at the corners of his eyes and his down-turned brows.

Just as Ranboo's eyes landed on the spot in front of Karl that he planned to teleport to, three very loud, very alarming things happened.

First, the villains Toast and Corpse stumbled out of the shadows as though stepping out of smoke despite the perfectly clear air. Caught between them was a tiny, raging figure dressed from head to toe in black cursing up a storm and thrashing violently but not truly making much headway in escaping.

They caught Orpheus.

"She called the cops—" **"A hero strike team—"** they start to speak over one another while Orpheus's voice raises even louder in an attempt to drown them out with meaningless obscenities.

What the three of them shouting over one another didn't hide, however, was the abrupt and alarming sound of dozens of windows shattering in unison, followed shortly by the hissing of smoke canisters and the dull metallic clunks then made as they bounced across the floors. Anyone not wearing a mask with filters started coughing violently as the room came under a thick haze from the gas clogging up the air, but it was far from enough to hinder any of them beyond mild inconvenience.

Boots hit the floor, swat teams shrouded in black and the more colourful figures of heroes in full costume were blurred through the fog. Karl Jacobs' grey and white sweater damn near vanished into the haze but Ranboo knew where he had been and he *wasn't* going to risk that final damning tape falling into the hero's hands without knowing which one it was.

It only took one pull of his power to bring him across the room and nearly nose to nose with the rogue, who flinched back at the sudden burst of particles flying in his face but not fast enough to step out of Endwalker's reach as a hand closed around the front of his hoodie. He tried to jerk away again but it only made him that much easier to knock off his feet as Endwalker hooked the smaller man's ankle with one of his feet and yanked it out from under him as he shoved his upper body the other way. Karl landed flat on his back with a pained wheeze.

The sound of the metal tin and glass clattering against the floor was lost to almost anyone but the two of them over the roar of orders being barked and flashy, destructive and loud powers abruptly filling the room. Ranboo pinned the rogue with one knee on his chest and reached with long limbs to easily retrieve the film from the floor, but the item lying next to it gave him pause.

"*Don't,*" Karl wheezed, his voice already rough from inhaling whatever chemical smoke was hanging low in the air. "It's not—" he coughed. "It's synthetic. Your hybrid genes—"

“Jacobs!” someone— Foolish, Ranboo thought— bellowed over the cacophony in the room. *“Get us out of here!”*

There was an undertone of panicked urgency in his voice that Ranboo did *not* like coming from Foolish of all people. Still, he was pretty sure he understood why when the faint whine of electricity reached his ears and dozens of tiny red lights all along the same low level of the shelves shone brightly through the chemical fog. Too low for anyone to see while standing, especially hidden by the shelves above them.

“Oh my god he's *insane* — ” Ranboo hissed, snatching up both the tape and the syringe of Trigger lying next to it.

Karl didn't even bother trying to push Ranboo off of himself before he started to glow with the shattered light of a kaleidoscope, making everything about his clothes and appearance shift with the geometric shapes that danced around him in a rainbow and brought attention to their position that had thus far gone ignored. Someone closer shouted and figures moved through the fog toward them but Ranboo wasn't focused on them. Ranboo was looking past them at the nine other figures starting to light up with the same kaleidoscope effect and back at the red lights on the explosives that had started blinking at one-second intervals.

Memoir was going to bring this whole warehouse and half the surrounding district down in a matter of seconds and they were going to use Karl's time manipulation to give them a clean getaway. No evidence, no witnesses, no survivors. Except for Ranboo and whoever he was fast enough to take with him.

There had to be at least three dozen people in this building alone, not to mention the backup units waiting outside or whatever night security or workers still left in the district.

For a moment time seemed to slow down, and whether that was a side effect of being so close to Karl while he used his powers or simply Ranboo's brain working overtime to give him just another second to think didn't matter. Because Ranboo had the answer right in the palm of his hand.

The only question was— was he brave enough to do it?

Ranboo... Ranboo liked being alive. He liked being himself even when sometimes it felt like he wasn't himself after everything he had been through. He liked helping people get home safe from bars even when it meant he had to beat up the people trying to ruin their night. He liked playing on the recreational volleyball team even when it was exhausting after a night of chasing muggers and laughing with his friends. He liked getting to know people, meeting new people who he grew to care for and having new friends and family in his life.

But was how much Ranboo liked those things worth the lives of every single person in this building? The dozens of good men and women who also like to help people? Who also saved lives? Who laughed with friends and had people they loved?

Ranboo wasn't like Tommy and Tubbo in the sense that he *looked* for good reasons to throw his life in the way of. He didn't actively seek ways where his sacrifice could be someone else's gain. He always tried to work within his means, to know his boundaries and to ask for

help when he couldn't do it alone. But he was still like them in a lot of ways, all of them were teenagers who were willing to lay their lives on the line to help other people.

Hopelessly selfless, Crumb had once called it. She would know, Ranboo never asked her and Captain Sparklez to come with him to save Tubbo, they just offered and refused to take no for an answer. And they paid the price.

All of this happened because Ranboo refused to take Dream and Spectre's lives. Because Techno refused to take their lives. Because Tommy *saved* their lives. And Ranboo had been steadfast in not allowing anyone else to take them either.

So really, was it even a choice?

Still seeming as though the world was moving through molasses, Ranboo felt strangely calm as he tugged down the zipper on his jacket and shrugged off the heavy material. He wasn't wearing his normal black long-sleeve under his gear, instead still in the bright red pyjama shirt with *The Blade's* symbol on the front, hidden by the heavy Kevlar vest.

His bracers had undersleeves, but it was easy enough to push the fabric below his elbow and expose the pale purple veins running under the milky white skin of his left arm.

He could practically feel the surge of power in the air as Karl finished chanting under his breath, eyes cracking open only to widen almost comically at the sight of Endwalker still kneeling next to him, about to do exactly what the rogue just explicitly told him *not* to do.

"Endwalker don't!" he cried, the light around him flickering as his focus wavered and that only pushed Ranboo's resolve further. If he didn't do this now then there was the possibility *no one* would get out of this warehouse alive.

No one else dies today.

Chapter End Notes

I'd say someday I'll stop ending on cliffhangers but I think we all know I won't.

Also I think I lost a bet to Eris, author of the amazing [Welcome Home Theseus](#), on who could finish a chapter faster... like two months ago lmao. So I belatedly admit defeat, congrats buddy.

I shall return someday with another chapter like the cryptid author I have become. Until then my wonderful readers o7.

End Notes

For those that like refreshers: [Character Info Google Doc](#) with aliases and names highlighted in green.

Come check out my art and yell at me on [Tumblr](#), [Twitter](#) or [TikTok](#)

Just One Mistake also has a [Discord Server](#)! I hang out there sometimes and post writing snippets and art but there's also a bunch of super cool people there to chat with about JOM or whatever else you want! It's just a place to chill and make friends, so come hang out :D

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!